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The Wishing Well
and other stories



The Wishing Well

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Margaret Baker

*Illustrated by
Peggy Fortnum*

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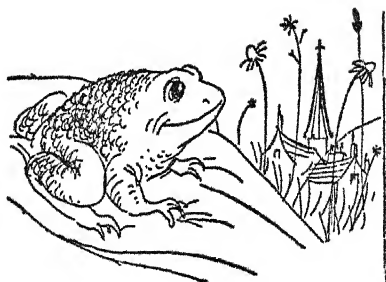
Other Books by Margaret Baker

A BOOK OF HAPPY TALES
FIFTEEN TALES FOR LIVELY CHILDREN
TELL THEM AGAIN TALES

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To Ena
with love



1.—*The Wishing Well*

ONCE upon a time there was a tadpole who lived in a wishing-well—at least, it was said to be a wishing-well, but there was some doubt in the matter. The blackbird, who had her nest in the hawthorn that overhung the water, was positive that all wells were alike and had no magic about them; on the other hand, the pretty, nervous little mouse, who made her home among the hawthorn roots, was equally positive that the well would grant any wish made near it.

“That’s why one has to be so very, very careful,” she whispered cautiously. “It’s so easy to wish for things one does not really want, and just think how awkward it would be if the wish came true! When I’m discontented I hardly dare open my mouth for fear

of saying something silly before I can stop myself."

The uncertainty worried the tadpole. Sometimes he felt sure the mouse must be right, and while that mood lasted he wriggled happily in the mud and water where the overflow from the well trickled away; but a few minutes later he would be equally certain that the blackbird was the one to believe, and then he lay under a stone and sulked.

"If only I could be sure, it would be so much better," he thought.

There was an old spider who had spun a marvellous web between the lowest branches of the hawthorn and the stones at the head of the well, and as he spent most of his time hanging in the centre of his elaborate fly-trap doing nothing at all, he was supposed to be a great thinker.

"He's sure to know," decided the tadpole; "I'll ask him."

It was some time before he had an opportunity to put his question, but a windy night having done some damage to the web, the spider let himself down to make a few repairs only an inch or two above the water.

The tadpole managed to catch his attention. "Oh, please will you be so good as to tell me if this is a wishing-well?" he asked eagerly.

The spider spun round and round on the end of his thread while he considered. "It may be," he said at last, "but——"

"But what?" asked the tadpole, as the spider made a long pause.

"But then it may not."

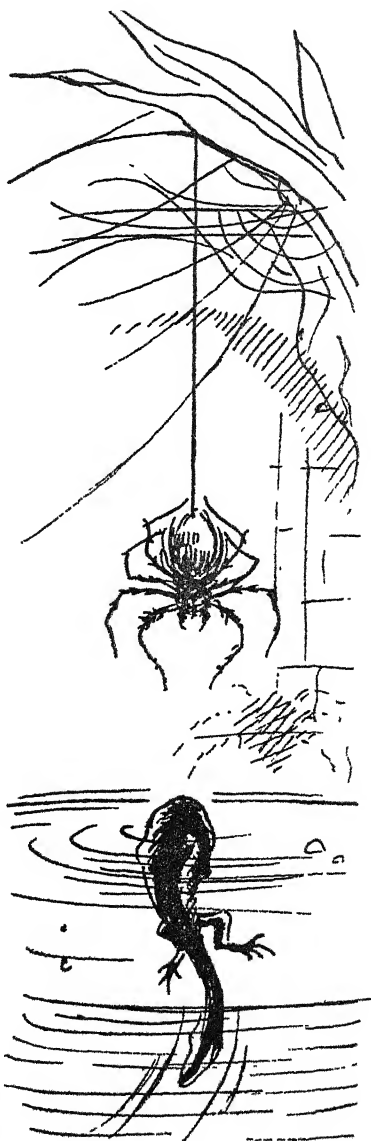
"That doesn't help me a bit!" said the tadpole plaintively. "I do so want to be perfectly certain about it."

"If it's a wishing-well, your wishes will come true, and if it isn't, they won't," said the spider. "Whether you know the kind of well it is, or whether you don't, will not make a scrap of difference."

"It will make a lot of difference to my feelings," said the tadpole. "I've wished as hard as I can, and I shall worry and worry till I know if the wish is going to come true."

"If you've wished and nothing's happened, it can't be a wishing-well; I should have thought that was clear enough," said the spider.

"Oh, but it isn't that kind of a wish," the



tadpole hastened to explain. "It's not a wish for something to happen, but for something not to happen. It hasn't happened yet, so it's all right up to the present, but I keep being afraid it may. If I only knew——"

"If I only knew what you are talking about, I might be able to make a little sense of what you are saying," interrupted the spider testily. "What is it that hasn't happened?"

"I haven't turned into a frog. I simply couldn't bear to be a frog."

"Why not?" asked the spider.

"Would you like to be a frog?"

"Of course not," said the spider. "Don't ask silly questions." And he rolled up his thread and hauled himself into his web.

The tadpole was quite depressed. "Time is getting so short," he sighed anxiously. "I might begin to turn into a frog any day now. I'm sure all this worry is beginning to tell on my health. I don't believe I've grown a bit bigger for days and I've such a queer feeling in my tail. Goodness!"—he broke off. "Suppose I'm beginning to grow back legs!"

He turned round and round in as small a circle as he could to see if the legs were really appearing, but all he succeeded in doing was to make himself so dizzy that he had to lie in the mud to recover.

A shadow fell across the well, and looking up through the water he saw two girls looking down.

"I don't know what to do," said the tadpole miserably.

"You can't do anything, as far as I can see," said the spider. "Your legs are getting longer and your tail shorter and your mouth wider and your eyes more popping with every hour that passes. You might as well make the best of a bad job and try not to mind."

"Try not to mind, indeed!" thought the tadpole. "I wonder what he would feel like if he knew there was no escape from turning as green and shiny as a newly-painted water-bucket? And I feel so odd and unlike myself, and I can't breathe comfortably unless my nose is out of the water. I'm dreadfully unhappy."

Two or three days dragged themselves to an end and there was no concealing the fact that he would soon have lost all resemblance to a tadpole. His tail was so shrunk that he could not even catch a glimpse of the tip of it, while his legs were only too much in evidence, particularly the front pair.

Then came a fresh, sunny morning, when even a disappointed, low-spirited once-was-a-tadpole could not help feeling more cheerful.

"If I'm a frog, moping won't help matters," he said with resignation; "and as I've got legs I might as well use them to see something beyond this wretched puddle."

He climbed a little awkwardly up a grass-blade that was trailing its tip in the water and sat on the well-edge. He could see up and down and across

the lane, and there was even a distant view of the village.

"Maybe, when I get used to things, I shan't be sorry I've stopped being a tadpole," he thought as he sunned himself. "If only I wasn't so smooth and shiny——"

He stopped short and then hastily stretched out first one leg and then another, turning round and round till it was a wonder he did not fall back into the water.

"I'm NOT smooth and shiny!" he croaked. "I'm not smooth and shiny! And I'm not bright green! I'm all beautifully wrinkled and mud-coloured! It is a wishing-well after all and I've not turned into a frog! I've turned into a toad!" •



2.—*Martha Goes On Holiday*

MARTHA GOODBODY'S cottage was not exactly anywhere. It was not quite on the common, though the common was only just round the corner of the lane; and it was not quite in the village, though the church tower looked but a stone's throw away; yet in spite of living nowhere in particular, Martha never found herself lonely. Hardly an hour would pass without someone walking up the path between the borders of mignonette and pansies, and the wonder was that she ever found time to keep her garden hoed and her kitchen so neat and shining that it looked as if it had only that minute been set to rights.

The first visitor to the cottage every day was Nancy Muddle, who was sure to be in difficulties of some sort.

"With a family the size of mine, what else can one expect but trouble?" she would sigh. "I don't know what I'd do if I hadn't you to talk to, Martha Goodbody."

"You know I'm glad to be of any help I can," Martha would answer.

"But that's not all I came about," Nancy would say as she finished her tale of woe. "Will you be so kind as to let me have the loan of your clothes-pegs? It

seems as if I never have half enough on washdays."

When she did not come to borrow the pegs, she borrowed the flat-irons, or the cinder-sifter, or the scrubbing-bucket; and the little Muddles in a body would bring the things back at tea-time and wait expectantly while Martha went to see if she had any treacle toffee left.

The next person to make her way up the lane every morning was generally Sophy Clutter, who could not start a day's work without mislaying something she wanted to use.

"I can't think what has happened to the hammer!" she would exclaim. "I've looked everywhere for it—such a waste of time when I'm so busy and all the stair-carpets to nail down. 'But Martha will lend me hers,' I said to myself."

After Sophy Clutter would come Fanny Merri-



weather, who always seemed to be expecting company and to be short of tea-cups, or spoons, or a large kettle, or even chairs; and when all the village chimneys began to send up spirals of smoke, and an appetising smell of cooking filled the air, Tibby Featherhead would come running up the path to beg the loan of the pepper-castor, or a pudding-basin, or a cupful of flour. And after Tibby there would be someone else, and someone else again; and when all the borrowing was over, everyone had to come back to return what she had taken away and to waste a little time chatting.

Not one of them ever stopped to wonder if Martha found it inconvenient to be without her pegs and her hammer and her pepper-castor, and Martha was much too kindly to mention such a thing herself.





Then one day the postman was seen hobbling up the lane, and before an hour had gone all the village knew that Martha had been invited to pay a visit to her nephew in London Town and that on Tuesday morning she would take her seat in the carrier's cart and drive to the cross-roads to meet the coach, and that she would not be back for a fortnight.

When Tuesday came all her friends left their work and ran out to wish her good-bye as she rattled across the green behind the carrier's fat pony; and after she had disappeared round the corner in a cloud of dust, they stopped to gossip a little and tell each other the village would seem quite strange without her.

—How strange they found out almost as soon as they were home again!

Nancy Muddle, who was in the middle of a heavy wash, as usual, was the first to realise what Martha's holiday was going to mean.

"It's a lovely day for drying," she said to herself as she took the last sheet out of the tub. "I'll just slip over to Martha's to borrow a few more pegs. —But goodness me! She's not there! And a whole basketful of clothes



waiting to be hung out! I could sit down and cry, that I could!"

Then her face cleared. "She's sure to have left the key under the big stone by the door," she thought; "and I know she'd have told me to get the pegs, if I'd remembered to ask her before she went."

Only waiting to take off her damp apron, she hurried up the lane. The key was under the stone, just as she had expected, and she let herself in and found the peg-bag. "I might as well borrow the besom, too," she told herself; "Martha can't use it while she's away and it will save me coming up for it when I want it."

Hardly was Nancy home again than Sophy Clutter was feeling under the stone for the key. She was making gooseberry jam and could not find her scissors to snip off the heads and tails, and she had actually started out to borrow Martha's pair before she remembered that the cottage was empty.

"But I'm sure Martha wouldn't mind if I helped myself," she thought; "and I'll take the preserving-pan while I'm about it and spare my legs a journey this afternoon."

Within half an hour the key was being fitted into the lock again, for Fanny Merryweather was expecting company and could not air her spare bed without the aid of a warming-pan; and after Fanny came Tibby Featherhead who could not cook the Yorkshire pudding unless she borrowed a baking-tin of the right size; and after Tibby came someone else, and someone else again, for they had all grown



so accustomed to making use of Martha's things that they could not get on without them.

And next day Nancy Muddle borrowed the flat-irons and the bellows, and Fanny Merryweather borrowed Martha's rocking-chair, and Tibby Featherhead borrowed the tea-caddy, and someone borrowed this and someone else borrowed that, just as if Martha Goodbody were at home to give them leave. The only difference was that no one troubled to return anything when she had done with it, but kept it in case she should need it again.

Of course they all meant to return everything in good time for Martha's homecoming, and of course they all put it off from one day to another till the very evening before Martha was expected back. There could be no more delaying then, and at dusk, when each one thought she was least likely to be seen by her neighbours, they all went struggling across the green from different directions, so laden with what they had borrowed that they had to keep stopping to rest.

At the corner of the lane they met—it could not help but happen.

"Gracious me!" exclaimed Nancy Muddle, peering round



in the dusk. "You don't mean to say you've borrowed all that stuff while Martha's been away!"

"You're not the one to find fault if we have, Nancy Muddle!" retorted Sophy Clutter. "Look what you're taking back yourself!"

"Yes, indeed!" cried all the others.

"I only borrowed what I should have done if Martha had been there," protested Nancy.

"So have I," said Sophy with a toss of her head. "I don't see any harm in that."

"She likes to have me make use of her extra china and a chair or so," said Fanny Merryweather.

"And I'm sure she never grudges helping me out when I happen to run short of anything," added Tibby Featherhead.

"Martha is always glad to do anything for anybody," said all the rest.

"I don't wonder the house looked a bit empty when I was there last," rejoined Nancy. "It's a good thing she isn't home yet!"

"But she is home, Ma!" piped one of the little Muddles who had come to help carry the things his mother had borrowed. "She came back ever such a little while ago."

"What!" shrieked everyone.

"It's not my fault!" whimpered the little Muddle, getting behind his mother's skirts.

For a full minute no one said a word; then



Nancy picked up her bundles. "It's no good standing here," she said.

The others followed her, trailing up the lane and through the garden gate and along the path in a dismayed procession. There was no need to grope under the stone for the key this time, because the door was on the latch. Nancy pushed it open and walked in, trying to look much bolder than she felt.

"I've just come to bring back these few things I borrowed while you were away, Martha," she was beginning, but broke off in the middle—there was no one there!

"She's gone for the beadle!" gasped Tibby Featherhead. "Whatever shall we do?"

"I don't believe she's come back at all!" exclaimed Sophy Clutter, seizing the nearest little Muddle and preparing to shake him. "I believe you made it up to give us a fright, you naughty child!"

The little Muddle wriggled himself free. "No, I didn't!" he protested indignantly. "Just you listen! She's upstairs in bed!"

In the sudden silence Martha's snores, gentle and regular, proved that he was right.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief that the awkward moment of explanation was put off and eagerly agreed that it would be far the best to put the borrowed things in place as quietly as could be and come again in the morning.

There was very little sleep in the village that night and a great deal of tossing and turning and wondering what excuses would sound most reason-

able. The more tossing and turning and wondering, the worse it seemed. Whatever would Martha say? And suppose she shut the door in their faces and refused to be friends with them again? That was a dreadful thought, for they had grown so used to carrying all their news and troubles to her that nothing had seemed quite right while she was away.

But it was a night's rest lost to no purpose. Whatever Martha might say or do they must try to explain



what had happened, and before the dew had dried from the pansies and mignonette in Martha's garden, Nancy and Sophy and the others were arguing outside the gate, each one trying to push her neighbour forward to be the first to meet Martha's anger.

• Before they could settle the matter, the door

opened and Martha herself, her face beaming with smiles, came hurrying down the path to meet them.

"Now isn't that a kindly thought to come so early to welcome me home?" she cried.

"But——" gasped Nancy.

Martha did not notice the interruption. "Of course it was wonderful! If I hadn't seen London Town for myself I'd never have believed it! But the best of going away is coming back again."

"But we weren't expecting you——" began Nancy.

"No more you were," said Martha; "but when I thought how cosy my own kitchen looked, and how comfortable I found my own chair, I couldn't keep away any longer."

"But——" began Nancy for the third time.

Martha had too much to say to wait for anyone else to speak. "The carrier dropped me at the lane end just after sunset, and what do you think I imagined when I got in?" she asked. "It must have been the jolting I had had and the poor light and all the excitement and being nearly asleep on my feet, for I imagined I had been robbed and that half the things had disappeared from the kitchen!"

"But——" cried Nancy desperately.

"But of course I hadn't!" Martha interrupted, not meaning to have her story spoilt. "When I came downstairs in the morning there was the kitchen with everything in place and looking as bright and neat as if I'd just cleaned it for Sunday."

I had to sit down and laugh at myself, and I shall go on laughing every time I think of it."

"It—it is rather funny!" said Nancy.

"Very funny!" agreed all the others hastily and laughed to keep Martha company.

"It will be a good story to tell to the end of my days," said Martha, wiping tears of merriment from her eyes with the corner of her apron.

Nancy Muddle looked at Sophy Clutter, and Sophy looked at Fanny Merryweather, and Fanny looked at Tibby Featherhead, and Tibby looked at someone else and someone else again, and the looks said as plainly as words could do that well was best left alone.

"But there's one thing certain," said Nancy presently when they were going home, their fine excuses all unmade; "Martha Goodbody's going to have the use of her own things after this as far as I'm concerned. I'd never be able to hold up my head for shame if I borrowed so much as a thimble from her again."

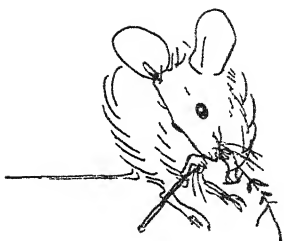
The rest could not but agree with her, and when the carrier set out for market next morning he had a list as long as his whip of things he was to bring back—clothes-pegs and flat-irons, scissors, spoons and teacups, a hammer, a preserving-pan, a besom and a baking-dish, flour and pepper, a cinder-sifter and an easy chair and all manner of odds and ends.

"You'd think half the village was furnishing again," he said to himself as he jogged along the road. "I wonder what it's all about."

Martha Goodbody had reason for wondering, too, when day after day went by and none of her visitors asked for anything except good advice; but neither she nor the carrier were ever any the wiser.



3.—*The Plumping Party*



ONCE upon a time there was a mouse called Titty who was the smallest, very much the smallest, of a large family. It would not have mattered if he had had the smallest tail, or the smallest ears, or the smallest paws, but to be the smallest in every way was very trying. He was always being told he was too little to do this, or too tiny to be allowed to do the other. His brothers, Nibble and Scrabble, teased him and sometimes would not let him join in their games; and his sisters, Pitter and Patter, were always being kind and thoughtful and helping him to do things he could do perfectly well for himself.

"I'm not a baby!" he would squeak indignantly. "I'm just as old as you are."

"But you're so tiny, 'Tittywee,'" they would say; "and you're not nearly strong enough to do as we do." And then they would whisper together something about 'Poor little Titty'—it hurt his feelings dreadfully.

His mother was worst of all. She insisted on washing him long after the rest of the family were thought capable of keeping their own fur in order; and she was always asking advice from other mothers of large families, and the advice was generally something horrid like ground-ivy tea,



or going to bed early.

"It's very queer that it's always the nasty things which are good for you," grumbled Titty; "and I'm sure they won't make me grow a bit faster."

Of course Titty was not unhappy all the time. He ran about, and played hide-and-seek and follow-my-leader, and poked his funny little nose into every hole and chink he saw, and enjoyed himself like any other young mouse. The world seemed full of delicious smells and delightful things to taste and nibble, of exciting places to explore and amusing creatures like daddy-long-legs and caterpillars to watch; and there was always the safe, snug burrow in the hedgebank to which he could go back when he was tired and sleepy.

That was all well enough while the summer lasted, but with the first chilly, autumn morning Mrs. Mouse began to be very busy and to expect all the family to be busy too.

"Come, my dears!" she said briskly. "No more time for play. Winter will soon be here and we must get ready."

"What is winter like?" squeaked Titty.



"It is very cold," said his mother, "and there is very little to be found to eat." *

Cold! Very little to eat! The five young mice squeaked in dismay.

"There is no need to make such a fuss," said Mrs. Mouse. "I did not say *we* need be cold or go hungry. We have this comfortable burrow where we can doze when it is too snowy or frosty to be pleasant out-of-doors, and we must all work very hard now to collect acorns and nuts to store for use when food is scarce."



"It sounds very dull," grumbled Nibble.

"It is not dull at all," said his mother. "For myself I shall not be sorry to go to sleep for a week or two—bringing up a family is tiring work. And, of course, there are the plumping parties."

The young mice pricked up their ears. "What kind of parties did you say?" asked Titty.

"Plumping parties," said Mrs. Mouse. "One of the things we have to do to prepare for winter is to eat as much as we can, so that we shall not feel hungry and wake up too quickly when we have settled down to sleep."

"Who gives the parties, Ma?" asked Pitter.

"Everyone in turn," said Mrs. Mouse. "We shall get ever so many invitations, and we shall have to ask all those who have shared their good things with us to come and sample what we have collected."

The young mice all began to squeak at once.

"Can Pitter and me give a party all by ourselves?" cried Patter.

"We'll only ask the jolliest mice to our party, won't we, Nibs?" said Scrabble.

"Mine will be the best," squeaked Titty, making himself heard with difficulty.

"Yours!" cried his brothers and sisters. "Fancy Titty thinking he can give a party all by himself!"

"I can!" exclaimed Titty indignantly. "You wait and see!"

"Nonsense, Titty," said his mother. "You are not nearly strong enough to manage alone; you must help the others."

"You shall share with us, Tittywee," said Pitter kindly.

"I won't share with anyone!" squeaked Titty. "I won't be treated like a baby."

His mother held up a paw. "That's quite enough, Titty," she said severely. "I will not have any more argument."

Titty knew it was no use saying anything after that, but he did not mean to give up the idea of a party of his own. "It will be the best, the very best of all of them," he told himself, "but I'll keep it a secret till it's quite ready. They'll find out I can do things just as well as anyone else, even if I am the smallest."

He trotted at the tails of the others while their mother showed them the best places to look for fallen acorns and hazel nuts, and how to dig round,

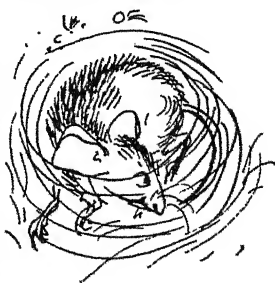
underground holes and line them with leaves and grass to make storehouses. He tried to look as if he^d were not paying much attention, but he was watching and listening very carefully, so as to know exactly what to do.

As soon as his brothers and sisters were all busily at work, Titty slipped away and scampered along the border of the field till he came to an old wall. It was built of loose stones with all sorts of holes and chinks in between. Titty poked his nose into one after another till he found what he wanted: a hole just large enough for him to squeeze through, but too small for anyone else to be able to follow him. On the other side of the hole was a hollow space that might have been made on purpose for a store-house.

He was so pleased that he had to run round and round after his own tail till he was out of breath.

"They'll none of them be able to get in there!" he thought triumphantly. "Nibs and Scrabble can't steal my nuts to tease me, and Pitter and Patter can't come and show me the right way to do things ; it's all my very own. Won't they be surprised when I invite them to my party and let them peep inside at all the good things I've collected for them!"

He began at once to carry in leaves and moss, and was



so busy that he almost forgot that if he were away too long the others would come to look for him and his secret would be a secret no longer. He hastily found a hazel nut and took it to where his sisters were digging.

"Wherever have you been?" asked Pitter.

Titty pointed vaguely with a paw. "Over there," he said.

"But you're supposed to be helping us," complained Pitter.

"I am helping," said Titty. "I've brought a nut—a big one."

"Don't be silly!" said Pitter, who had made herself very hot and tired. "There's all this earth to be kicked out before we begin to collect nuts."

Titty looked pained. "But I'm too small for hard work," he said; "you know I am. I can kick out a little earth," he added, "but I know I shall soon get tired."

As he had been working so long at the hole in the old wall, he got tired even sooner than he had expected, and when the young mice were called in to supper, he was found curled up fast asleep.

"Poor little Tittywee!" said his mother, looking reproachfully at his sisters. "You shouldn't expect him to do too much when he is so tiny."

"But he's hardly done anything at all," said Pitter sulkily. "He's made himself tired with playing."

* * * *

Pitter and Patter did not mean Titty to escape his fair share of work again. "Come along, Titty-wee," they said firmly next evening. "Unless we mean Nibs and Scrabble to get all the best nuts, you must help us properly to-night."

"All right," said Titty meekly, and he crept into the hole they were digging and began to send the earth flying in all directions.



"Do mind what you are doing!" cried Patter. "You're filling our fur with soil."

Titty apologised and began to dig so carefully that he hardly did anything at all except get in the way. Pitter began to grow cross.

"You don't seem to remember how small I am," he said reproachfully when she scolded him.

"No one would think you were small by the amount of room you seem to take up here," she retorted. "I can't do anything without falling over you or your tail."

"I'm very sorry," said Titty. "I think perhaps I'd be more use if I went to look for acorns." And he scampered away before his sisters could stop him.

He did not have to go further than the old wall to find acorns in plenty, for an oak-tree grew just beside it and with every breath of wind the acorns came tumbling out of their cups on to the grass. Titty ran backwards and forwards to pick them up and poke and push them into his store-hole, and every now and again he carried one back to his sisters.

"Here's ever such a huge one," he would squeak and roll it into their hole on top of them and then run away again as fast as he could.

Patter grew cross as well as Pitter, and when at last they caught him they told him just how naughty he was to leave nearly all the work to them.

"I'm not leaving it all to you," said Titty in an injured voice; "I've brought ever so many acorns; you can't expect me to do more than that when I'm so small."

Pitter sniffed. "You're not as small as you'd like to make out," she retorted.

"It's not me who makes it out," protested Titty. "When it was things I wanted to do, it was all of you who kept saying I was too little. You can't change about like that."

"Anyway, you're not going to



waste time playing tomorrow," said Patter. "We're both coming with you to collect things."

But Titty still managed to spend a great deal of time at his private store, for he persuaded his sisters that far the best acorns and nuts were to be found near the old wall. Whenever they were starting home with a load and passed near his hole he would make some excuse for dropping behind. First he said he had hurt his toe on a stone, then he complained that his ear felt funny, and then he had a pain in his tail, and after that he wanted a drink.

"You go on," he said every time; "I'll come along in a few minutes."

Once Nibble and Scrabble nearly discovered what he was doing. He was just coming backwards out of his hole after taking in an extra fine hazelnut when they came past. The sight of the wriggling tail was too much for Scrabble and he gave it a nip and a pull that brought his small brother tumbling on top of him with a squeal.

"Tittywee, as I'm alive!" exclaimed Nibs.

"What are you doing larking about in that old wall?" asked Scrabble.

"You leave my tail alone, can't you?" was all Titty would answer.

"Lucky for you I was there to give it a tweak," said Scrabble; "you might have been stuck for hours."

"Besides, you're supposed to be collecting nuts, you know," said Nibs in a big-brother tone.

"I've an awful ache in my back," whimpered Titty. "It's carrying things far too heavy for me, I expect. I was resting."

"It looked like it," said Nibs sarcastically; "playing, I should call it. Or is there something in there?"

In another moment he would have poked in his long nose and discovered Titty's store, but Titty was too quick for him. "Ware, weasel!" he shrieked suddenly and took to his paws.

Nibs and Scrabble did not waste time looking round, and raced after him; but Titty soon found he had not been as clever as he supposed, for when they heard of the weasel, Pitter and Patter firmly refused to go anywhere near the old wall again and insisted on Titty coming nut-collecting with them in the opposite direction.

If Titty had not been a very determined young mouse, he would have abandoned his great plan altogether, but by shaking himself awake every afternoon, long before his brothers and sisters thought of rousing, he managed to get a little time to himself. Sometimes, too, at the end of the night's work, when the others were playing, he would make some excuse to run off alone. He used to come home so tired he could hardly put one paw in front of the other, but he did not mind that because very soon he was going to be able to prove that he was not too small to do as well or even better than the rest of the family.

His mother looked anxiously at him when she saw him drop to sleep almost as soon as he crept into the burrow. "He grows smaller and thinner every night," she said, wrinkling her nose in a worried way. "I'm glad it's nearly time for the plumping parties to begin; they should do him good."

"When will it be really time?" asked Nibble and Scrabble eagerly.

"Any evening now," said Mrs. Mouse. "Why! Here is Mrs. Shrew making her way through the stubble. I shan't be surprised to hear she has come to leave invitations for the first party of the season."

That was exactly what Mrs. Shrew had come to do. "It may be a little early, dear Mrs. Field Mouse," she said, "but if the cold weather comes before we are well fattened, we shall have a restless winter and start the spring hungry."

"The children were just asking about the parties," said Mrs. Mouse. "They are all impatience."

"And besides that," went on Mrs. Shrew, hardly noticing the interruption, "Snuzzle Dormouse always goes everywhere, and if we start too late in the season he falls asleep before he has time to give his own entertainment; it is most annoying when we provide him with so many meals and then get nothing in return."

Titty was a little put out to hear the parties were to begin so soon. He wanted his store-hole to be quite full when the guests arrived, and now it

seemed there was only going to be one more evening before he began to be too busy eating and enjoying himself to have time for work. Clearly he must have that whole evening to himself.

It was easy to pretend he was too tired to go out with his brothers and sisters, but he had not expected that his mother would be tired too.

"We'll have a quiet, cosy time all to ourselves, my pet," she said, giving the top of his head an affectionate lick as she curled up beside him.

"Bother!" thought Titty, "now I shan't be able to get away for ages!"

He was right, for every time he thought Mrs. Mouse safely asleep and began to get cautiously to his paws, she opened her eyes and told him not to fidget so. He nearly fell asleep himself while he was waiting, but at long last she began to snore gently and he was able to escape. He poked his nose out of the burrow to be sure no one was near to see him, and then he scampered as fast as he could to the old wall.

How he worked! And how few nuts and acorns there were to be found now! He was soon very hot and tired, but he never once thought of giving in.

"They shall see I can do just as much as the others," he kept saying to himself; and before the night was over the hole was so full that even he was satisfied, and he crept slowly home.



Titty found it delightful to waken next evening and remember there was no more work to do and no need to get up till he felt inclined; indeed, Mrs. Mouse had explained to her family that the longer they stayed in bed the better, for that would help them to grow fat quickly. Titty yawned and stretched and then curled up into a comfortable ball again, but he kept one ear open; he did not mean to be left at home while his brothers and sisters went to the plumping party.

When the moon was rising, the young mice shook themselves awake and licked their fur with special care; then they trotted one after the other behind their mother with Titty at the tail of the procession, to the cornfield where the Shrews had made their home.

The party was a great success. There was a treasure hunt, with ripe hips and haws hidden in the stubble, and a nibbling race to see who could eat a chestnut the fastest, and a most delicious supper of wheat-on-the-stalk. Titty did not win any prizes—being so small he could not be expected to eat as quickly as Nibs and Scrabble, or his sisters, or any of the Mice and Shrew cousins who had come from neighbouring fields and woods, but he ate more than any-one else because he had been working so hard and was much the hungriest.

• Next evening Titty



and all the others were invited to a party given by the young Wood-Mice.

They played 'Hunt the Acorn', and had beech nuts and pine-kernels for prizes in all sorts of games that did not mean much running about. Snoozle Dormouse was there and ate nearly as much as Titty, but not quite.

Another evening Nibs and Scrabble gave a party to their own particular friends; Pitter and Patter gave another one soon after, and Titty went to both and enjoyed himself very much. The Voles sent invitations to meet in an oat-stack waiting to be threshed, and at Aunt Short-Tail's party there were wind-fall apples. Not an evening went by without a plumping party being held somewhere, and Titty went to them all and ate and ate and ate.

"You won't be able to waddle soon," said Nibs. "We'll have to roll you along like a fir-cone."

"A bit mean to eat so much when you aren't going to give a party yourself," said Pitter.

"And were so lazy about helping us to get ready for ours," said Patter.

"You wait a bit," Titty was nearly saying, but stopped himself in time, remembering his party would not be a surprise if he boasted about it beforehand.

Then Cousin Flick-Ear came to ask all the young mice to go down to the village and spend the evening with her at the Vicarage.

"I can't think how you manage to get through the winter in the fields," she said to Mrs. Mouse.

"If you once tried living indoors you'd never be content with a burrow again. A house is so dry and warm and there is no need to go to the trouble of laying up a store for the cold weather; whenever one is hungry one just slips out and takes one's choice of crumbs and scraps, and often even of tarts, or cakes, or cheese."

"O-o-oh!" said Nibs and Scrabble.

"It's very kind of you to ask them," began Mrs. Mouse, "but I really don't think it would be wise——"

"Nonsense," said Cousin Flick-Ear. "If you are thinking of cats and traps, I can set your mind completely at rest. The Vicarage mousetrap has been out of order for weeks; and as for the cat, I can promise you she will be fast asleep. I happen to know the Vicar is having boiled cod and parsley-butter for supper, and after eating the bits from the plates the cat will do nothing but doze on the hearth-rug till morning."

"Of course, if you are sure it is quite safe——"

"A great deal safer than out-of-doors, with weasels and stoats and owls likely to put in an appearance at any time. The children will come home without a whisker touched."

She was quite right. The young mice came home again at dawn quite unharmed, but also very hungry.

Cousin Flick-Ear had met them at the hole under the kitchen-window and taken them all round the Vicarage inside the walls. They were allowed to peep into the rooms through chinks and cracks,

and the Vicar and the cook and the cat were all pointed out to them.

"It is not many young field mice who get the chance to see what you are seeing to-night," said Cousin Flick-Ear. "It is quite an education for you."

When they came to the dining-room she led the way across the floor so that they could pick up crumbs from under the table. There were very few, because cod and parsley-butter do not make many.

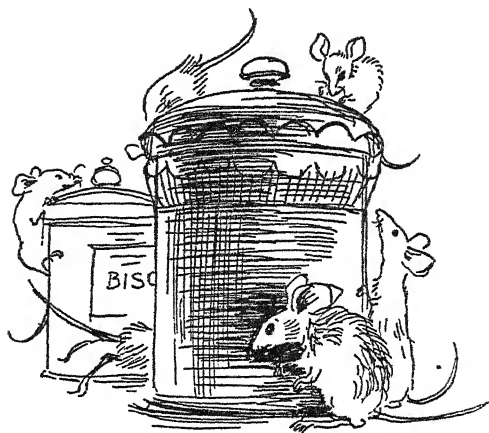
"Last week," said Cousin Flick-Ear, "the Vicar's youngest grandchild was here on a visit; he threw everything on to the floor—rusks and biscuits and even porridge. Such a pity you weren't here then."

The larder was even more disappointing. Cousin Flick-Ear led them round the shelves and explained what was in all the tins. "Sweet biscuits in here—unless you have tasted sweet biscuits you can't possibly imagine how good they are—and plain biscuits over there in the red tin. This box is for cake—the Vicarage ginger-cake is something to dream about—and they keep jam-tarts and mince-pies in here."

The young mice nosed round and round the tins.

"How do we get at the biscuits?" asked Titty.

"You can't get at them at all unless the lid happens to be left off," said Cousin Flick-Ear. "One was left off the day before yesterday and we all had plum-cake—delicious! But I am afraid we are not going to have the same luck to-night. You can



smell the cheese, however, if you put your noses here where there is a chip in the cover."

From one shelf to another it was the same. According to Cousin Flick-Ear there was no end to the things they could not reach, but the best she could offer them to eat was a packet of breakfast oats and some cold, boiled potatoes.

"If it were tomorrow there would be sausages hanging from that hook there and we could have had a feast," she explained; "we always have sausages on Tuesdays."

"Then why didn't you ask us to come tomorrow?" asked Titty.

"Hush! Don't be rude!" whispered Pitter. "Mother would be cross if she heard you."

"Mother would be cross if she knew I had wasted a whole evening and not got a bit fatter," said Titty. "In fact I'm pretty sure I shall be a lot

thinner with all this walking about for nothing."

"If you're not careful, Cousin Flick-Ear won't invite you again," said Patter.

"I don't want to be invited," said Titty, "and I shan't invite her when I give my party."

As soon as he realised what he was saying, he nearly bit his tongue trying to keep his secret back, but it was too late.

"Your party!" exclaimed Pitter.

"You can't give a party!" said Nibs.

"I can, and I'm going to," retorted Titty, making up his mind in the twitch of a whisker. "It will be tomorrow and it's going to be the best party of all!"

"Don't talk nonsense!" said Scrabble and cuffed him with his paw.

"It's not nonsense!" retorted Titty.

But no one believed him.

* * * *

Next evening when it was time to get up, Titty had disappeared. He came in later, a little out of breath and with muddy paws.

"Wherever have you been?" asked his mother. "What is the use of going to all those plumping parties if you are going to run about and wear off all the fat again?"

"I had to run about this time," said Titty. "It's my party to-night, and I was giving out the invitations."

"But you're not giving a party!" exclaimed his mother.

"Yes, I am," said Titty, "and I've invited everyone—except Cousin Flick-Ear—and they'll be here in a few minutes. You all kept saying I was too small to do things myself and now you'll see I'm not."

"You've invited everyone!" repeated his mother. "How could you be so naughty? Run, Pitter and Patter, and tell Mrs. Shrew it's all a mistake; and you, Nibs and Scrabble, see if you can stop the Wood Mice and Snoozle Dormouse, and——"

But it was too late; the guests were already arriving, some hurrying from one direction and some from another.

"So delightful to have another invitation from your family, dear Mrs. Field Mouse," said Mrs. Shrew.

"Your parties are always so deliciously filling, ma'am," said Snoozle Dormouse.

"Indeed, I don't know what to say," squeaked poor Mrs. Mouse. "Titty never said a word to us till a few minutes ago; it's all his own doing, I assure you. I can't think what——"

"Dear little fellow!" said Mrs. Shrew. "And I must congratulate you, Mrs. Mouse, on his improved appearance. I wouldn't have believed he could have grown so plump in the time—quite remarkable."

"But it is so naughty of him to have brought you all here like this and nothing ready," apologised Mrs. Mouse.

"But it is ready," protested Titty, who had been



vainly trying to make himself heard. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you where the party is to be."

With Snoozle at his tail and the Shrews and the Wood-Mice and all the rest close behind, Titty trotted along the track to the old wall, full of pride and importance.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" his mother kept saying. "It is really too bad of him."

When they came to the hole Titty stopped and waited for everyone to come up. This was the moment for which he had worked so hard.

"Here's the place," he announced triumphantly. "Climb up and look into that hole among the stones; it's as full of nuts and acorns as it will hold. I collected them everyone myself, and you are to eat them all!"

The guests pushed and jostled each other to peep through the chink.



"Capital! Capital!" said Snoozle Dormouse, his whiskers twitching in anticipation.

"But how are we going to get at them?" asked Nibs. "I can't get in—I've tried; the hole's too small."

"Of course it's too small for you," said Titty. "I didn't mean anyone to get inside and interfere except myself; there is some use in being the littlest."

"Fancy the young shaver thinking of that!" exclaimed Scrabble.

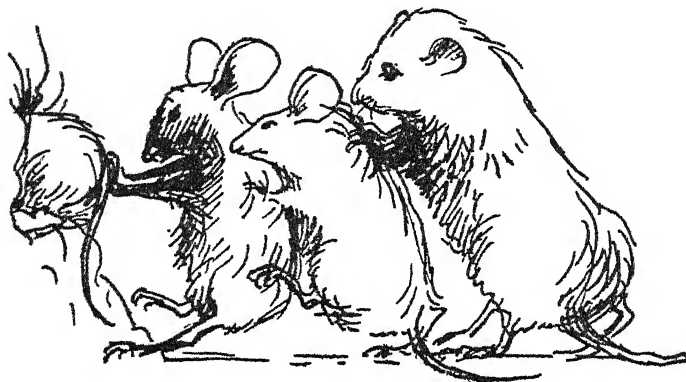
Titty walked proudly up to the hole. "I'll go inside and pass the things out to you," he said. "You must each come up in turn."

"All right," said Nibs. "But hurry up: we're hungry."

Titty's head and shoulders were already in the hole. "I am hurrying," came his muffled protest

as he wriggled and twisted to get the rest of himself inside.

At first everyone laughed to see his struggling back legs and lashing tail, and then the horrid truth began to dawn on them all—the plumping parties had been too successful and Titty had stuck.



Nibs and Scrabble and Snoozle Dormouse tried to push him in; after that they tried to pull him out, which was easier. Then all the young Mice and Shrews and even Snoozle himself tried in turn to squeeze into the store, but they could not get far enough even to stick. Pitter had the bright idea that perhaps they could hook the nuts out with their tails, but it did not work.

In the end they all had to admit there was nothing to be done. Mrs. Mouse ran from one to another of Titty's disappointed guests in a flutter of apologies and hoped they would excuse him because he was too small to know any better.

Poor Titty!

Again and again as he had dragged the nuts and acorns to his hole he had imagined what would happen when he rolled them out to his guests. He had pictured how Nibs and Scrabble would stare to hear him praised on all sides; he thought how his mother would lick his ear and tell him she was proud of him; and how Pitter and Patter would say to each other, "We mustn't call him Tittywee any longer, because he can do just as much as we can."

And instead of it happening like that, here he was wishing he was so small he could disappear altogether.

Mrs. Shrew begged Mrs. Mouse not to mention it, and Snoozle Dormouse said he hoped he wouldn't be too tired when he got home, but he always felt queer if he had to go without a meal, and some of the younger guests turned sulky and whimpered; and they all went away in little groups with their heads so close together that Titty knew they were whispering about him.

"How could you think of doing anything like that without telling me?" asked his mother. "I don't know when we shall hear the last of it."

"We'll jolly well take care *he* doesn't hear the last of it for a long time," threatened Nibs and Scrabble.

"Fancy telling us he was too small to work much!" said Pitter indignantly; "and pretending he was tired so that he would get a chance to go off by himself."

"I never thought about getting too fat," whimpered Titty.

"As if that isn't what plumping parties are for!" scoffed Patter. "Anyone with any sense at all would have thought of that!"

Poor Titty!

He wished the winter would come straight away and he could curl up and go to sleep till everyone had forgotten about the party that had never been. But the weather was still mild and dry, and invitations to plumping parties kept coming in and his mother would not hear of him staying at home. He tried to pretend that he did not hear the giggles and whispers that always greeted his arrival, and that he did not mind all the fun poked at him; but it was only pretence and he minded very much.

"They treat me more like a baby than ever," he sniffed. "It's as horrid as horrid can be."

* * * *

At long last the wind settled in the north and Mrs. Mouse tucked her family in dry grass and then crept into bed herself.

"Now they'll forget all about the party," thought Titty as he dropped off to sleep.

But the wind did not stay in the north very long; in fact, it did not stay in any quarter for more than a day or two at a time and that made everyone very restless. No sooner was it cold enough to make all the young mice glad to tuck their noses

in their paws and go to sleep, than it began to grow warm again, and Nibs, or Scrabble, or one of the others would waken and complain that they felt hungry and could not possibly settle down again without another supper.

The stores went down alarmingly quickly and Mrs. Mouse shook her head and said she could only hope it would be an early spring.

But it wasn't.

Just when the warmer days should have come to stay, the wind decided it had been changeable long enough and settled down in the east. The tender, green shoots that had begun to appear in the hedgerows and along the field borders, shrivelled up with the cold, and the ground was so hard when Nibs and Scrabble tried to dig for roots that they only hurt their paws. It would not have mattered if there had been plenty to eat still in the storeholes, but there was hardly anything left at all.

At first the young mice made the best of things, but as they grew hungrier and hungrier they began to grumble.

"Come, come!" said their mother. "Grumbles never cured anything."

"But I'm so empty!" whimpered Titty.

"If you hadn't made such a mess of that plumping party of yours, we'd have been much fatter and shouldn't feel so bad now," said Nibs.

"If you hadn't been so silly and chosen a hole no one else can squeeze into," said Pitter.

"And then been so greedy that you got too fat to get into it yourself!" said Scrabble.

"But we were meant to get fat," protested Titty.

"There's not much fat on any of us now," said Pitter.

"You can see my bones," said Patter.

"You can see more of my bones than of anyone's," whimpered Titty.

"Then, I say!" cried Nibs. "He's gone small enough to get into the hole!"

"Let's take him there and see!" cried Scrabble.

But there was no need to take Titty; he was already out of the burrow and racing along the border of the field to the old wall.

"That's the place!" cried Nibs. "Lend a paw, quick, and we'll all help to push him in."

"I can do it myself," cried Titty, but the others were too impatient to pay attention and he suddenly shot head foremost into his store.

He was on his paws in an instant and pushing and poking nuts through to the outside. "That one's for Pitter—and that for Patter—and this for Nibs—and this for Scrabble—and this one for me!" he finished and followed it out of the hole.

In a marvellously short space of time there was nothing left but shells.

Nibs wiped his whiskers with his paw. "In you go again, Tit, my boy," he ordered, "and get us some more."

"All right," said Titty, and then he stopped

short. "But we're forgetting!" he exclaimed. "It was to have been a party."

"Never mind about that," said Nibs. "No one is giving parties now."

"I'm going to," said Titty. "Think how pleased everyone will be to have a party when they are so hungry."

"But we could eat it all ourselves," protested Scrabble.

"But we're not going to," said Titty. "I'm going to have my party just as I'd planned, and you must go and invite everybody who came before and be as quick as you can."

"Look here, Titty," began Nibs firmly.

"It's no use," said Pitter. "We shall have to do what he wants because he's the only one that can get into the hole."

Nibs and Scrabble ran off in one direction and Pitter in another, while Patter went to bring Mrs. Mouse. Titty wriggled into the hole again and pushed the good things out as fast as he could.

It took a little while to make the Shrews and the Wood-Mice and all the others understand what had happened, but when they did they lost no time in hurrying to the old wall. Even Snoozle Dormouse, who had been dreaming hungrily of breakfast, stretched and yawned and shuffled quickly after the rest.

Mrs. Mouse was there before them and was waiting to welcome the guests and invite them to help themselves.

"Really, my dear Mrs. Mouse," said Mrs. Shrew between nibbles at her third acorn, "quite an excellent idea to have a spring plumping party!"

"Scrumptious!" squeaked all the young Shrews with their mouths full.

"The nuts haven't kept half badly," mumbled Snoozle, trying to get a whole kernel into his mouth.

Titty's bright, black eyes were sparkling with pride. "They'll never be able to say I'm too small to do things now," he thought.

When none of the guests could eat another mouthful, they all came to shake Titty's paw and say how much they had enjoyed themselves.

"Let me know when you're thinking of giving another party, old fellow," said Snoozle, patting him on the back. "Always glad to come, you know. Now I shall be able to get comfortably to sleep again and I shan't mind even if the spring is late."

"It can't be much longer now," said Mrs. Wood-Mouse. "We shall have it here surprisingly quickly as soon as the wind changes."

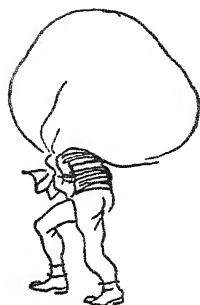
"But it's changed now!" cried Titty. "It's not blowing a bit from where it did a few minutes ago!"

"So it is!" exclaimed everyone.

"A truly delightful end to a delightful entertainment," said Mrs. Shrew.

"Three squeaks for Titty!" called Nibs. "He's given the jolliest party of the lot!"

4.—*Dusty, Musty*



ONCE upon a time there was a dusty, crusty miller who lived in a dusty, fusty mill and ground dusty, musty flour; and every week the miller grew crustier and the mill grew fustier and the flour grew mustier, and people began to complain.

Mr. Pepper, the polite, bald-headed little grocer was much put-out. "It doesn't seem as if a customer can come into the shop without grumbling," he told his wife. "Even if it is only a child sent to buy a pennyworth of baking-powder, it's been told to say 'And please, Ma's very cross about the flour, 'cause it's worse than last time'. I'm getting so that I never hear the shop-bell tinkle without such a horrible, sinking feeling coming over me that I can hardly drag myself to the counter."

"You'll have to speak to the miller, that's all there is about it," said his wife.

"I don't quite like to do that," said Mr. Pepper, and to judge by his expression the very idea gave him another of those sinking feelings of which he had complained. "He mightn't pay much attention. I never seem to be much good at speaking to people."

"Then you'll have to go on letting the customers grumble," said Mrs. Pepper, "and I must say that I don't blame them; I never tried to cook with

such musty, fusty stuff. Wait till you taste the scones I've made for tea."

"Oh, dear! I hope it's not as bad as that!" sighed the poor little grocer, for he was very fond of scones. "Of course I might write to the miller," he said brightening. "Yes, a letter will be far better than going to speak to him."

He cleared a space on the counter, wiped his pen, found a clean billhead and wrote:

Mr. Matthew Miller,
Dear Sir,

I hope this finds you as it leaves me. Sorry to trouble you, but the flour's not all it should be lately and the customers are making life a misery, which is hard on an honest man who only wants to do his duty. Please see what can be done about it and oblige,

Your humble servant,
George Pepper.

"That ought to make a difference," said he as he licked up the envelope.

The miller's answer was not exactly satisfactory, though it was what might be expected from a dusty, crusty man. It ran:

Mr. G. Pepper,
Sir,

If you don't like the flour you can go somewhere else to get some.

Yours truly,
M. Miller.

"But there isn't anywhere else!" cried poor Mr. Pepper; "there's not another mill for miles and miles. I wish I'd gone into the second-hand furniture trade instead of grocery; a little fustiness and dustiness only makes tables and chairs look older and so they fetch a better price."

"You'll have to go and see the miller, just as I told you at first," said Mrs. Pepper.

"I've got a better idea than that," said the little grocer hastily; "I'll send a message by the miller's man when he calls tomorrow with some more sacks of flour."

The miller's man was old and deaf and Mr. Pepper was quite bold with him. "Tell your master it's a disgrace to send out flour like this!" he said indignantly.

The miller's man put his hand behind his ear. "Eh?" he said.

"Tell him it's a disgrace to send out such stuff!"

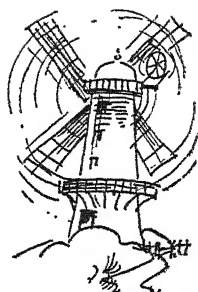
"Aye, it's going to be rough, master," agreed the miller's man.

"I said it's a disgrace to send out such flour!" shouted Mr. Pepper at the top of his voice.

"Nay, there won't be no shower while this wind holds," said the miller's man and drove away, leaving the poor grocer to mop his bald patch and decide reluctantly that he would have to go to the mill after all.

Next day was a half-holiday, and when the shutters were up and dinner over Mr. Pepper set out. It was a hot and gusty afternoon and there was a long

hill to climb, so that what with one thing and what with another he was in a very poor way by the time he reached the mill; and the clattering of the great sails over his head and the loud rumble of the grinding-stones did not make him feel any more at ease.



The miller came towards him out of the dusty, musty gloom of the roundhouse. "Now then, what do you want?" he growled.

"My—my name's Pepper," stammered the little grocer. "I wrote to you about the flour."

"And I wrote to you," said the miller. "Good afternoon."

Mr. Pepper hurried home as fast as his shaking knees would allow.

"Well, what did he say?" asked his wife.

"He's even worse than his flour, and I wouldn't go back for the world," he groaned. "I really don't know what I've done to deserve so much trouble; if it was all my own fault that the flour is so horrible, I couldn't be having a worse time."



Now exactly opposite the grocer's shop stood a cottage where a widow-woman lived by herself. In all the length of the village street there was not a better scrubbed door-step, nor brighter window-panes, nor whiter, starchier curtains; and in

all the length of the village street there was no one who had a greater dislike of musty flour. Every time she opened her kitchen cupboard Widow Wiggins wrinkled her nose and sniffed; and every time she sat down to her neatly spread tea-table she shook her head at the loaf and sniffed again.

"I shall have to step across the road and give Mr. Pepper a piece of my mind," she used to say; and each afternoon—except on Sundays and half-holidays—no sooner were her cup and saucer and plate washed and dried and put away, than she went to the grocer's shop.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" Mr. Pepper would sigh as the shop-bell jangled and interrupted him in stirring his second cup of tea; "she's as regular as the church clock itself."

It was in vain that he explained that he had done his best to get the miller to improve the flour.

"What's the good of doing your best, if your best isn't any use?" she would ask, and Mr. Pepper had to admit it wasn't any good at all.

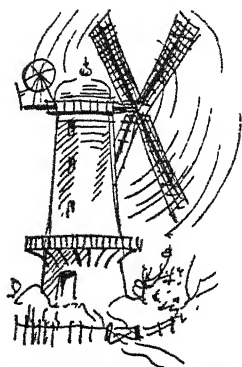
At last Widow Wiggins came to the end of her patience. "I shall go and see the miller myself," she said.

"Indeed, I wish you would, ma'am," said Mr. Pepper. "If anyone can make him see sense, I'm sure you can."

"If he doesn't see sense, I'll know the reason why," said Widow Wiggins, and she went back to her cottage, banked up the fire with slack, put the kettle on the hob to be in readiness for her

return, and then set out for the mill.

The miller saw her coming and went into the round-house and shut the door and put up the bar; no one as rusty and crusty as he had become could be expected to have a liking for company. He was sure he would soon hear her rapping, or calling to him to come out, and he meant to go on with his work and take no notice. When nothing happened he grew impatient. First he listened at the latch-hole, then he softly let down the bar and opened the door a tiny chink. There did not seem to be anyone in sight, so he opened it a little wider, and a little wider still, and cautiously put out his head, but only just in time to see the whisk of a skirt and the flapping tip of the widow's shawl as she disappeared round the mill. He crept after her, and there she was with her nose pressed against his kitchen window, but it was only for a moment. Before he could make up his mind what to do, she



had turned the corner of the house; and when he got to the corner himself it was to see her vanish round another.

"I never knew such impudence!" he muttered under his breath.

The next glimpse he

caught of her she was at the base of the mill, picking her way through the groundsel and nettles that almost hid his cabbages and gooseberry bushes, and shaking her head at his badly staked beans. She did not seem in the least disturbed by the sails as they swept above her head, and when she reached the mill door, which the miller had forgotten to close behind him, she walked inside as boldly as if she had a right to go where she pleased.

The miller hurried after her with so many indignant exclamations on the tip of his tongue that he was quite purple in the face; but before he could say a word she began to tell him just what she thought of things.

"I never saw such a dusty, cobwebby place in my life," said she, looking up and down and round about; "and your kitchen is no better, to judge by what I could see through that shockingly dirty window."

"And what business is that of yours?" spluttered the miller.

"A great deal of mine and of everybody else who has to put up with the disgracefully musty flour you grind here."

"I don't make it musty on purpose," retorted the miller. "It goes musty to spite me."

"Don't make matters worse by talking nonsense," said the widow. "What you need is a wife. In a couple of weeks a sensible woman would have the mill so that you'd hardly know it, and the kitchen looking as if one might sit there without getting

low-spirited, and you'd be turning out flour as sweet as a nut."

The miller shook his head unbelievably.

"And she'd not let you go about out at elbows, with pins instead of buttons," she went on; "and she'd see you had decent meals, which, to judge by your looks, is what you've not had these many long months."

"Indeed, I haven't," said the miller. "The mustiness gets into everything."

"Of course it does," said Widow Wiggins. "I should think you've forgotten the taste of a nicely-browned, flaky apple-turnover, or a freshly-tossed pancake."

The miller drew the back of his hand across his mouth at the mere mention of such dainties. "A wife doesn't sound such a bad idea," he said thoughtfully, "but how am I to get one?"

"I'll see to that," said the widow briskly. "There are plenty of young women in the village, and when I've found one to suit you I'll let you know."

With that she walked out of the round-house and down the hill and the miller was left to stare after her in wonderment. Then he thought of the apple-turnover again. "I hope she won't be long about the job," said he.

Widow Wiggins had no intention of being long over her search, for she had a fancy for an apple-turnover herself, one made with flour that was dry and sweet. She spent the evening considering the suitability of each unmarried young woman in the

neighbourhood, and next morning she rose betimes, put on her shawl and bonnet, and walked across the fields to visit Farmer Cowpens and his wife. "One of their daughters would do very well for the miller," she thought.

But when she got to the farm she did not find things as she had expected. The farmer was busily at work in the yard, and his wife, with her sleeves turned up to the elbows, was skimming the milk in the dairy, but of the three daughters, not one was to be seen.

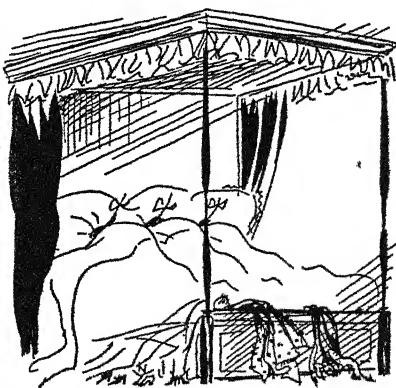
"The girls are in the kitchen cooking the dinner, maybe," said Widow Wiggins; "or cleaning, perhaps, or gone to market with the eggs."

"Dear, no!" said Mrs. Cowpens with a comfortable laugh. "They're fast asleep in bed. They were out dancing last night till I don't know what hour and they're not likely to be seen for a long while yet."

Widow Wiggins threw up her hands at such laziness, but Mrs. Cowpens only laughed comfortably again.

"To tell the truth," she said, "the longer they are, the better I shall be suited, for I can get through the work a great deal faster by myself."

"Then I'll wish you



good-day," said Widow Wiggins, and walked out of the dairy and across the farmyard and back to the village.

"The idle hussies!" she said to herself. "If that is the way they behave, there would not be one cobweb the less at the mill though they married the miller all three. I'll go and see the blacksmith's daughter; I wonder I did not go to see her first, for she's the hardest worker I ever knew."

When she reached the smithy, there was the blacksmith's daughter half covered in a huge apron, her face fiery red, and her lank hair lying damp on her forehead, so hard had she been scrubbing and polishing.

"Please to wipe your feet before you come in," she said; "I've only just washed the doorstep."

She led the way into the kitchen. The smith was sitting at the table, a newspaper spread on his chair for fear his clothes were sooty, and another newspaper under his feet in case his boots marked the tiles, while in front of him, on a third newspaper laid over the table-cloth, was a plate of cold meat and still colder potatoes.

"I really can't find time to cook a hot meal every day and keep the house clean at the same time," said his daughter plaintively. "You'd never think the work I have to do cleaning after him—Oh, do mind what you're doing, Pa! You've got your feet off the newspaper again."

"These papers will be the death of me!" grumbled the blacksmith.

Widow Wiggins pursed her lips. "It's no use saying what I came to say," she thought. "With such a wife the miller would run away in a week and there'd be no flour at all."

Without more ado she walked out of the house and then stood a moment in the road to consider where she should go next. Should she visit the seamstress, or the butcher, or the thatcher to see if one of their daughters might prove what was wanted? In the end she turned her steps to the school-house. A school-master's daughter should be capable and sensible and hard-working, else what were the use of schools at all?

As she walked up the path she began to wonder what the strange smell could be, and then she sneezed and then she coughed, and then her eyes began to smart and water.

The school-master's wife flung open the door and she, too, was sneezing and coughing, and very cross, into the bargain, for the house seemed full of smoke.

"What can have happened?" cried Widow Wiggins.

"You may well ask," said the school-master's wife with her handkerchief to her nose. "Here has Grace let the dinner burn to a cinder again while she has her nose in a book, and what we are to eat I don't know! She says it is a waste of time not to occupy her mind when she is waiting for things to cook, and this is what happens!"

"What is the world coming to when there is

not a girl to be found who can be trusted to make a comfortable home?" cried the widow. "I wish you good morning."

Widow Wiggins dragged her weary feet homewards. "I shall never find a wife for the miller at this rate," she sighed, "not though I look for a year and a day; and that means I shall have to go on eating musty flour without a hope of getting better."

She dropped into her chair, but as suddenly jumped up again. "There now! To think I never thought of that!" she exclaimed.

Her tiredness vanished as if by magic, and she brought out potatoes and onions and bacon and all sorts of good things, and chopped and peeled and peppered and salted and made a most delicious hot-pot, with not so much as a sprinkle of musty flour to spoil it, and popped it in the oven.

When it was baked she put the hot-pot in a basket and covered it with a cloth, and then she dressed herself in her best and set out once more for the mill.

The miller saw her coming and opened the door. "Have you found me a wife?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed," said Widow Wiggins, and as it were by chance she lifted a corner of the cloth over her basket so that the smell of onions and gravy and browned potatoes could escape.

"Did you bake that?" asked the miller, putting his nose nearer and nearer the basket.

"To be sure I did," said she.

"Then you needn't bother to find me a wife," said the miller; "I'll marry you."

"Just what I came to suggest myself," said the widow. "So, as we are both of the same mind, we'll get married as soon as I've had time to get everywhere clean."

"Must we wait as long as that?" asked the miller plaintively.

"I'll not come to live in a place while it's hung with cobwebs and you can't see out of the windows for dirt," she said firmly. "But I'll soon have it looking very different—and you, too—and we'll have the wedding a fortnight come Saturday."

She was as good as her word, for she swept and rubbed and scrubbed and polished to such purpose that by the time the fortnight had gone there was not a trace of mustiness or dustiness in either the mill or the mill-house, and the flour that poured from between the grinding-stones was as fresh as could be.

And when it was all finished she rinsed out her bucket and hung the floor-cloth to air and wiped her hands on her rough apron. "There's nothing to prevent us getting married now," she said.

"I only wish we'd done it years ago," said the miller, and he had already lost so much of his



crustiness that he actually kissed her. As the wedding was going to be soon there was nothing improper in that.

A very fine wedding it was. Everyone was so glad there would be no more musty, dusty flour that the whole village came to join in the merry-making and to wish happiness to the miller and his wife; and of all the guests there was none so cheerful as little Mr. Pepper the grocer.

"Fancy being able to hear the shop-bell tinkle without going all of a tremble!" he said to Mrs. Pepper as they walked home arm in arm after it was all over. "I can't remember that I ever enjoyed a wedding so much in my life—except, of course, my own."



5.—*His Worship's New Shoes*

ONE fine, summer morning His Worship the Mayor of Dumbledyke received a very important letter. At the top of the paper were the Royal Arms, and at the bottom was a royal signature, and in between was a message to say that Her Royal Highness the Princess would be passing through Dumbledyke the very next week and would do the Mayor and Aldermen the honour of lunching with them.

No royal princess, nor even a duchess, had ever visited Dumbledyke before and everyone was most excited at the news. His Worship was so busy giving orders here and calling committees there, that he had hardly time to take his meals; but among all the important business needing his attention he did not forget that a Mayor who is to have the privilege of entertaining royalty should be suitably dressed.

"Whatever else happens, I must have a new pair of shoes," said he.

His Worship was very particular about his shoes at all times, and even more particular now. Only the best leather was to be used, of course, and they were to be made to measure and be in the latest fashion.

The shoemaker delivered them in person when they were ready. "A better pair I never made,

and I'm proud to have done it," said he; "and if your Worship will pardon the liberty, Your Worship can be proud to wear them. They'll last a life-time and never let in a drop of wet."

The Mayor put on the shoes then and there and they fitted perfectly.



"Very good, very good indeed!" said he, stepping up and down in front of the mirror to see the shoes from every point of view. And then he pulled out his purse and paid the shoemaker, and the shoemaker licked his pencil and receipted the bill 'With respectful thanks, Nicodemus Snobber' and went home.

The Mayor put on his carpet-slippers and rang for his housekeeper.

"These are the shoes I shall wear when I receive Her Royal Highness at the Town Hall, Mrs. Muffet," said he; "please put them away carefully so that they will not come to any harm."

"And as nice a pair of shoes as anyone could wish to have, I'm sure, Your Worship," said Mrs. Muffet. "It's to be doubted whether even Her Highness will be wearing a better pair—though different, of course, Her Highness being a lady."

She took the shoes to the kitchen and everybody there had to come and admire their shape and softness, their polish, their stitching and even their laces. Then the shoes were carried upstairs and shut in a cupboard with the fur-trimmed, red robe and the three-cornered hat that His Worship would wear on the great occasion.

Too much praise is not good for anyone, even shoes, and though this pair had been cut from the very finest leather and the best workmanship had gone to their making, they quickly developed the fault of thinking themselves important, and they passed the time in the cupboard imagining the notice they would attract from all the grand company and the Princess in particular.

"It will be quite embarrassing!" they told each other.

"You need not worry," said the three-cornered hat. "No one will have an eye to spare for anyone but Her Highness. Besides that, it is not our job to call attention to ourselves; we have to concentrate on upholding the dignity of His Worship the

Mayor, all of us together—that is the thing that matters.”

The shoes pretended not to hear. “What can an old black hat know about it?” they whispered to each other. “He’ll see he’s mistaken when the time comes.”

The great day dawned at last and with the first peep of light everyone was afoot from one end of the town to the other and all was hurry and bustle and excitement, and nowhere more than in the house of His Worship the Mayor. One minute His Worship was all dignity and importance and the next he was all nervousness and fluster, and it seemed as if he would never be dressed to his satisfaction. He found a speck of dust on his hat and was sure his fur-trimmed robe smelt of moth-ball; his gold chain of office could not be made to sit as it should, and he kept putting down his handkerchief and gloves and forgetting what he had done with them. The only things with which he did not find fault were his shoes.

“They are all right, at any rate,” he said more than once with a sigh of relief.

“Of course we are!” said the shoes.

His Worship walked downstairs at last and out at the front door, and there were the aldermen lined up in procession, and the town band and the school-children and everybody else; and as soon as the Mayor appeared the band started to play and people cheered and waved their handkerchiefs.

“That’s because of us!” said the shoes.

They marched at the head of the procession on His Worship's feet. "Here they come! Here they come!" shouted the children.

"Most proper and flattering attention," said the shoes, though no one had noticed them at all.

The procession stopped at the Town Hall and everyone took up their places on the steps with His Worship in front of them all, and the people cheered more than ever, for they knew it was almost time for the princess to arrive.

"A truly remarkable reception!" said the shoes. "It is to be hoped that hat is taking notice—he tried to make us believe we were of no importance, but it was probably only jealousy."

And now there was a rumble of wheels and a clatter of hoofs in the distance, and the church bells began to clang and the crowd to shout itself hoarse. A coach-and-six swung round the corner, pulled up with a flourish and out stepped the Princess.

This was the moment to which the shoes had been looking forward. They were sure the Princess would notice them at once; perhaps she would stoop down to see them closer, certainly she would compliment the Mayor on wearing so handsome a pair. But to their horror His Worship bent so low over the Princess's hand that his fur-trimmed robe swept the ground and hid his feet altogether.

"Mind what you are doing, you clumsy red blanket of a gown!" cried the shoes. "No one can see us!"

When the Mayor straightened himself and the shoes were on view again, the Princess was busy saying polite and charming things to the aldermen and important people who were being presented to her; and as soon as she had time to look about her again the Mayor offered her his hand to lead her into the Town Hall where the banquet was waiting for them.

It should have been honour enough for the shoes to walk up the steps and along the corridors beside the white kid slippers of the Princess with their jewelled buckles and red heels; but the shoes were far from satisfied, and in their annoyance they pinched and rubbed His Worship's toes to remind him they were there and were not being given a chance to receive the admiration due to them.

His Worship was so surprised at such behaviour in a well-made pair of shoes that he almost exclaimed "Ouch!", but he managed to turn it into a polite cough.

The shoes were more annoyed than ever when the banquet began, for they found themselves hidden under the table, and there they had to remain through all the eating and the speech-making, in spite of the discomfort they caused the poor Mayor. And when the banquet was over it was time for the Princess to leave and His Worship offered her his hand again to lead her back to her coach.

If the shoes were to attract her attention something

had to be done at once. Forgetting good manners and everything else, they squeaked!

The Mayor could not believe his ears. His beautiful, expensive, new shoes could not possibly be behaving with such bad taste! But before he had taken a dozen steps there could not be any doubt as to the squeaking; first one shrieked "Look at me!" and then the other. He tried walking on tip-toe, and then with his feet stiff and flat so as not to bend the shoes, but they squeaked as loudly as ever, and he could hardly pay attention to the Princess's conversation and said "Yes, Ma'am" when he meant "No", because he was so embarrassed.

The squeaking did no good as far as the shoes were concerned, because the Princess was much too polite to let it be seen that she noticed anything wrong. She walked down the Town Hall steps without one glance in the direction of His Worship's feet, in fact he might not have had any feet at all.

The Princess went home in her coach and six, and the Mayor went home in a very bad temper. The shoes were bad-tempered, too, and pinched him all the way.

"I believe he kept us out of sight on purpose," said the left one.

"He was afraid we should take attention from himself," said the right.

"Next time we'll see that he doesn't treat us so unfairly," they agreed.

But His Worship was determined there should

be no next time, and the very first thing he did when he reached home was to drag off the shoes. Then he rang for his housekeeper.

She came as quickly as she could, for His Worship was jerking the bell-pull so violently that she thought the house must be on fire.

"Take these shoes away, Mrs. Muffet," he shouted. "Never let me see them again! They've disgraced me and they've disgraced Dumbledyke, and before royalty, which is worse!"

"Your beautiful new shoes, Your Worship!" exclaimed Mrs. Muffet. "But whatever is the matter with them?"

"They squeaked, Mrs. Muffet, they squeaked!" cried the Mayor, stumping up and down the room in his stocking feet. "Put them in the dust-bin! Throw them away!"

"Throw them away!" repeated Mrs. Muffet to herself as she hurried out of the room and closed the door behind her. "Did you ever hear the like, and they only new on this morning? I'll throw them no further than to my niece, Jemima Jolly, for she's three growing boys to keep in clothes and her husband gone to sea."

The shoes were horror-struck! It could not be true that on the very same day they had walked beside the jewelled slippers of a Princess they should be threatened first with the dust-bin and then with the scarcely better fate of being worn down at heel and kicked out at toe by His Worship's housekeeper's niece's growing family! If they could



have run away they would have been out of the door and across the yard and down the street in less time than it would have taken to tie their laces, but unfortunately they could not do anything unless there were feet inside them—they could not even squeak by themselves.

That very evening Mrs. Muffet put the shoes in a basket and carried them across the town to her niece Jemima. All the family gathered round to see what she had brought, and as soon as they saw the shoes the three Master Jollys began to quarrel as to which should wear them.

"They're mine, of course!" cried the eldest.

"I want them!" howled the youngest.

"Don't be silly," said the middle one. "They'll have to be mine because I'm the only one they'll fit."



"We were never meant to be worn by common little boys!" exclaimed the shoes indignantly; but although they had a pair of tongues between them they were not of the kind to catch the attention of human ears, and the dispute ended in the eldest

Master Jolly carrying off the shoes and declaring he meant to go to school in them next morning.

Unluckily both for the shoes and for himself the eldest Master Jolly was a well-grown lad, as his mother often boasted proudly, and even if the shoes had been trying to be helpful they could not have avoided pinching him cruelly.

"Take us off! Take us off!" they cried all the way to school. "Your great, clumsy feet are forcing us all out of shape! Take us off!"

The eldest Master Jolly would have been only too glad to do so before the day was half over. He tried easing his squeezed toes by standing first on one foot and then on the other to say his lessons, but he got no comfort and his knuckles were rapped for fidgeting; and when playtime came the other boys, instead of admiring his new shoes, went hobbling up and down crying "Ow!" and "Oh!" with every step. They even followed him home at tea-time with bent knees and toes turned in to imitate the way he was walking.



The moment he was safely indoors he pulled off the shoes and flung them in a corner.

"Anyone can have the horrid things who likes!" he whimpered, tenderly chafing his blistered feet.

"I told you I was the only one they'd fit," said the second Master Jolly triumphantly.

"You might just as well have let me have them from the beginning."

He spent the evening rubbing and polishing the shoes with the greatest care and that was very soothing to their feelings, but they were just as indignant as before to find themselves on the way to school again next morning. Even though the second Master Jolly took pains not to step in the puddles and kept stopping to wipe off any specks of mud with his handkerchief, he was only His Worship's housekeeper's niece's son and so no one in particular.

The bell had ceased to ring long before the school-house was reached, but the second Master Jolly did not mind that for it served to call attention to him as he clattered up the classroom to his place; he did not mind being made to stand in front of the class on a stool with the dunce's cap on his head, because it meant that his new and shining shoes were in everyone's view. But it was harder not to mind when he had to watch the other boys running



and jumping, without joining in their games himself for fear of getting the shoes scratched and their toe-caps kicked.

Next day the second Master Jolly went to school in the new shoes again, and the next day and the next; but the day after that he was heartily tired of taking care of them and he flung them in a corner just as his brother had done, and went leaping and bounding to school in a pair of boots so old that it did not matter what happened to them.

Next Monday morning the youngest Master Jolly demanded the shoes. It did no good to tell him they were far too big, and that he was naughty to scream and kick and throw himself on his back; he knew he had only to make himself sufficiently disagreeable to get his own way, and soon he was shuffling down the road in His Worship's shoes.

"Hello! Here they are again!" shouted the other scholars. "But it's a waste of time to wear two shoes at once when you could get both feet into one!"

The youngest Master Jolly had a very unhappy time. At every possible moment he was teased and mocked and made to run about so that the shoes would drop off, and as soon as he managed to pick them up and put them on again he was chased afresh. When lessons were over for the day he set off for home with all possible speed, but the boys were not going to miss the chance of further fun and they ran after him. When the shoes came off, as they quickly did, they picked them up and held them teasingly just out of reach, or threw

them from one to the other, or kicked them backwards and forwards across the road.

"Ma! Ma!" roared the youngest Master Jolly.

"Help! Help!" shrieked the shoes.

But Jemima Jolly had a panful of sausages sizzling on the fire and did not hear anything till the youngest Master Jolly burst howling into the kitchen; and by the time she knew what had happened and had seized the broom and rushed out, the other boys had disappeared and so had the shoes.

The youngest Master Jolly was consoled with a slice of bread and dripping and a promise of an extra sausage for tea, but the shoes were by no means through their troubles, for they had been tossed over the parson's garden wall and hung caught in a gooseberry bush.

"We can't stay here like this!" they cried in dismay.

But they did! They stayed there all night and half the next day and then they were found by the gardener's boy who had been sent out with a basin to pick enough gooseberries to make a pie.

"A pair of shoes! And nearly new at that!" he cried. "Here's a bit of luck! They'll fit me to a treat, see if they don't!"

"We have no intention of doing anything of the kind!" exclaimed the shoes. "We are not the sort of shoes worn by a gardener's boy. You will please take us to your master at once."

But the gardener's boy took them home, and as soon as he had finished his tea that evening he

put on his best coat and his necktie with the blue spots and laced on the shoes and picked a flower for his button-hole and went out walking with the little dairymaid from the farm over the way.

The dairymaid was used to the best coat and the tie with spots and a button-hole with a flower in it, but she was not used to such a fine pair of shoes.

"My!" she said admiringly, "but you do look grand!"

The gardener's boy had turned up his trousers at the bottom so that the shoes would show better, and now he turned out his toes as he walked. "The shoes aren't so bad," he said modestly.

"They're lovely," said the dairymaid.

But the shoes were not grateful for admiration from mere nobodies.

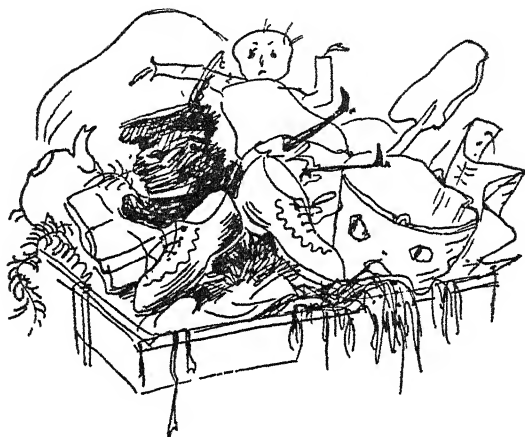
"It is shocking impudence of him to wear us at all, and even worse to do it so publicly," they told each other indignantly. "We owe it to ourselves to protest against our undignified position."

The gardener's boy came back from the walk very red and sulky and the dairymaid came back in tears.

"I'll never go out with you in those horrible, squeaking shoes again, never!" she whimpered angrily. "Everyone will say you've not paid for them."

"Everyone will be quite right," retorted the shoes. "He found us in a gooseberry bush. Now, young man, perhaps you will take us to your master, as you should have done in the beginning."

But the gardener's boy had his own ideas on the matter. "If I didn't pay for the shoes, that's no reason why they shouldn't pay me," he said to himself, and he sold them next day for a shilling to the rag-and-bone man when he came down the street with his donkey-cart.



The rag-and-bone man tossed the shoes into his cart on top of a pile of disreputable-looking articles—coats out at elbows and hats with broken brims, buckets full of holes and teapots without spouts, sacks and pan-lids and worn-down shovels and a dozen other things.

The shoes were horrified to find themselves in such company and tried to draw themselves away.

"You'll be out on the road in a minute," a rusty kettle warned them.

"Who cares if we are?" cried the shoes. "Any-

thing is better than staying here—we could not be worse off in the dust-bin with which they threatened us.”

“That we are worn out and old is no reason for despising us,” said the kettle. “We all have to come down in the world when we are not able to carry on with our proper work.”

“But we are neither worn out nor old,” protested the shoes; “we are almost new. We were made for His Worship the Mayor, and we have headed a procession and walked beside a princess and that only a few days ago.”

“Then what have you done that you find yourselves in a ragman’s cart?” asked a battered hat.

“What have we done?” repeated the shoes in astonishment. “As if our humiliating position were our own fault and not the fault of everyone else. We have been slighted, we have been kept out of sight on purpose, we have been treated as if we were no better than the most ordinary boots—we, whom anyone might be proud to wear—they all said so!”

“So that’s it, is it?” said the kettle.

“That’s what?” asked the shoes.

“You’ve been too proud to be of any use to anyone; and see where it has brought you!” said the kettle. “I’ve always gone on the idea that if you’re asked to do something, you should do your best to be obliging.”

“That’s been my idea, too,” said an old bucket.

"The things I've carried and the jobs in which I have helped, you'd never believe. But I did not raise any difficulty about being too good for even the meanest work, and I've got a lot of fun out of life. And now I'm too worn to be worth making water-tight again, the ragman is going to patch me up to hold corn for the donkey. I'll travel half over the country in that capacity before I'm thrown over the hedge for the robins to nest in."

It was the turn of the battered felt hat to add his word. "Make yourself useful and do it cheerfully and you'll have a long life and a merry one," said he. "I shouldn't wonder if I found myself topping a scare-crow for the summer, even though I have got down to the rag-and-bone cart; and I may go even further and put the finishing touch to a snowman and have a sight of Santa Claus, reindeer and all. Take a bit of friendly advice, you shoes; behave sensibly and make yourselves agreeable in your next job, no matter with whom it may be; that's the way to earn respect and consideration."

But the shoes were still too proud to accept suggestions from rags and rubbish, and taking advantage of the jerking and jolting, they let themselves be shaken to the edge of the little cart.

"We'll wait till we're passing some large and important-looking house," they whispered to each other; "then we'll drop off. We'll soon be recognised for the superior shoes we are in such a neighbourhood."



Dropping off was easy, but after that nothing happened as it should have done. Before they had lain in the road five minutes a puppy pounced on them and worried first one and then the other as if he thought them a new kind of rat. Fortunately he soon tired of the game and dropped them in a puddle and ran off to find fresh amusement.

The shoes had plenty of time to recover from this alarming experience for they lay in the puddle all the rest of the day. Most passers-by did not notice them at all; those who did only said, "Fancy throwing away a pair of shoes like that!"

and walked on. Wheels rolled within an inch of them, horses almost stepped on them, it began to rain and the shoes grew wetter and muddier and more and more unhappy—they almost began to wish the ragman would come back to look for them.

“We shall be ruined, utterly ruined by the damp if we stay here much longer, even supposing we escape being crushed out of all shape by some great mountain of a cart,” they moaned.

But just after nightfall a slow, heavy tread came down the road; it was the beadle going his round to see that all was well.

“Hello!” said he, flashing his lantern on the shoes. “What are they doing here by themselves in the dark?”

The shoes tried to explain, but of course it was no use as they could not make themselves understood. “It looks very suspicious to me,” said the beadle gruffly.

“Good gracious!” gasped the shoes. “Can he mean to take us to prison?”

The beadle tied them together by their laces and carried them at arm’s length so that they should not smear mud on his coat.

“What a dreadful thing if anyone should see us in such a situation,” groaned the shoes; “our reputation will be ruined—and only a week ago we were the centre of attraction!”

“What have you got there?” asked the beadle’s wife when he reached home.

"A pair of shoes that were loitering in a puddle," said the beadle, shaking his head solemnly. "They were up to no good, I'll be bound."

"No good to themselves," said the beadle's wife; "but they don't look to me the kind of shoes that were out to do any harm. If it wasn't for the mud they'd look as respectable as your own Sunday pair. Just wait till I've cleaned them a bit."

She wiped them with a wet cloth and then she rubbed them with a dry one, and after that she stood them in the chimney-corner.

The beadle looked at them over the top of his newspaper as he sat toasting his toes before the fire. "I ought to lock them up, by rights," said he

"Now you let them bide where they are," said his wife. "It's my belief the poor things have been abandoned; and instead of talking of locking them up it's your duty to find them a good home."

"It's my duty to take them before His Worship tomorrow to see what account they can give of themselves," said the beadle, "and that's what I mean to do."

"Oh, no! no!" cried the shoes. "His Worship ordered us to be thrown away before, and he will order us to be thrown away again."

But the beadle only turned over the page of his newspaper and took no further notice of them.

All night the shoes stood in the chimney-corner and the gentle warmth drew out the wet from their leather, but that did not make them feel any

more hopeful. "Whatever will happen to us?" they kept asking each other.

Now it was too late, they began to see how stupid and conceited they had been, and how their misfortunes were all their own fault. There could be no excuse for the way they had tweaked His Worship's toes and rubbed his heels when they had been made to measure so carefully; and squeaking, especially on a state occasion, would have been shocking conduct in the most ordinary shoes.

"If only there was someone somewhere whom we fitted, how serviceable and comfortable we would try to be," they sighed. "How differently we would behave if we had another chance!"

But the more they thought how angry His Worship would be to see them again, the less likely it seemed that they would be given an opportunity to make a fresh beginning, and they grew more nervous and miserable than ever.

Next morning while the beadle ate his breakfast and put on his great coat with the gold braid, his wife rubbed and polished the shoes.

"It's only fair to give the poor things a chance to make a good impression," said she.

The shoes were very grateful, but they were too low-spirited to look much better for all her hard work.

The beadle's wife shook her head over them. "But I don't know that I can blame them," she admitted. "If I was going to be taken before His Worship and didn't know what to expect, I should be feeling dull myself."

"What an understanding person," said the left shoe. "What a pity the beadle hasn't smaller feet; she might have offered us a home here if we could have fitted him. He wears a three-cornered hat just like His Worship, so it would not have seemed falling very low in the world."

"We mustn't talk like that any more," said the right shoe. "If we are allowed to keep someone's feet warm and dry we must not mind who or what he is."

The beadle wrapped them in paper and carried them off to the Town Hall.

"Good morning, Beadle, good morning!" said the Mayor. "A lovely morning indeed!"

It was clear His Worship was in an uncommonly cheerful humour, and there was good reason for that. Not an hour before, a letter had arrived with the Royal Arms at the top of the paper and a royal signature at the bottom, and it was all to say how very much the Princess had enjoyed her visit to Dumpledyke and how much she thanked His Worship for all the excellent arrangements he had made for her reception.

"If you please, Your Worship," said the beadle, "I found these shoes a-lurking in a puddle in a very suspicious manner just after dark last night and I took the liberty of taking them into custody."

"Shoes!" repeated the Mayor, putting on his spectacles to see them better. "Now that's uncommonly curious! I had a pair as like these as they well could be." He took off his spectacles

and polished them and put them back on his nose. "What is more curious still, I believe this is the very pair!"

"Now he'll order us to be thrown out!" groaned the shoes.

But His Worship rang the bell and sent for a shoe-horn, and when it came he put on the shoes and walked up and down in them. How careful the shoes were not to give the slightest squeak! How careful not to cause His Worship the least discomfort! And how hopefully they began to shine!

"They are my own shoes without a doubt," said the Mayor. "I had to discharge them for unmannerly conduct, but as they seem ready to behave themselves better, I shall give them another trial. There is no need for you to trouble further about them, Beadle."

When His Worship reached home that evening he rang for Mrs. Muffet. "Please to put these shoes away carefully," said he; "I shall wear them on Sundays and particular occasions."

"Well to be sure!" cried Mrs. Muffet. "They can't be the same pair Your Worship told me to throw away!"

"But they are, Mrs. Muffet," said the Mayor. "Perhaps I was too hasty when they annoyed me so by squeaking before Her Highness the Princess, but from Her Highness's gracious letter this morning, I believe she never heard them. I think they are ashamed of themselves and that I shall be able to trust them in future."

"Indeed, and I'm sure I hope so, after your kindness in overlooking what they did, Your Worship," said Mrs. Muffet. "Though how they managed to come back here, seeing I gave them to Jemina, I can't imagine," she told herself as she carried the shoes to the cupboard where His Worship's fur-trimmed robe and three-cornered hat were hanging.

"Hello!" said the hat. "We never expected to see you here again!"

"It's wonderful to be back," said the shoes.

"You didn't think much of our company before," the hat reminded them.

"We have changed our minds about a lot of things since we went away," said the shoes. "You will be able to rely on us in future to help you uphold the dignity of His Worship and of Dumbledyke on all occasions."

"Capital! Capital!" said the three-cornered hat. "There was good leather and good workmanship put into making you and you are a pair of fine fellows after all."

6.—*Methuselah*

DANDY went home at one end of the piece of rope the shopman had tied to his collar; John James went home at the other end of the rope, holding on to it with both hands. If there was the possibility of taking the wrong turning, Dandy took it, pulling so hard that he nearly choked himself; at other times he held back till his head seemed in danger of being pulled off. All the same John James remained convinced that he had bought a most remarkable and intelligent dog.



They had the greatest difference of opinion when they reached their destination, Dandy preferring the front door and John James having good reason to think it wiser to go in at the back one. John James got his way, but both he and Dandy were out of breath when they climbed the steps to the kitchen door.

John James tied Dandy to the leg of the kitchen table; then he changed his shoes, washed his hands, brushed his hair, and taking a long breath, like a swimmer about to plunge into very cold water, he went into the sitting room and closed the door after himself without being told. He meant to create a favourable impression.



Dandy nearly choked himself afresh when he realised that he had been left alone in a strange kitchen. He whined and gasped and struggled in a desperate attempt to follow John James, but as the rope was strong and the table heavy, nothing happened at all. He gave in suddenly and lifted his nose in a long-drawn howl.

A kitten scrambled on to the sill of the open window and looked in.

"Bless my whiskers!" he mewed, nearly falling off again.

A second kitten jumped up beside him. "You'd better not let Methuselah hear you using such language, Tit," she said reprovingly.

"But, I say, Tat! Look what's in our kitchen!"

cried the first kitten. "It's enough to make anyone bless his whiskers."

"It's a dog!" exclaimed Tat, and disappeared suddenly.

"Isn't that just like a girl?" observed Tit to no one in particular. "Come back, silly! It's tied to the table leg."

Tat scrambled on to the window-sill again. "What's it doing here?" she whispered.

"I'll ask it," said Tit the bold, and put his nose half an inch inside the room. "I say, you pup! Dogs aren't allowed here!"

Dandy, who had renewed his efforts to drag the table through the door, wheeled about, ears cocked, hair bristling, and caught sight of the kittens framed in the window. "What do you mean?" he barked.

"Dogs aren't allowed here," repeated Tit.

"You don't know anything about it!" retorted Dandy. "I'm going to live here."

"You're the one who doesn't know anything about it!" said Tit pertly. "You'll never be allowed to stop; Methuselah doesn't like dogs."

"What's he got to do with it, whoever he is?" asked Dandy.

"Everything!" said the kittens together.

"No one does anything here that Methuselah doesn't like," added Tat.

"Then what's going to happen to me?" Dandy asked in dismay.

"You'll be sent back where you come from," said Tat.

"But I don't want to go back!" wailed Dandy. "It was only a shop. I've got to find that boy. He'll not let them send me away. Why did he go out and leave me tied up here?"

"I expect he wanted to break the news about you a bit gently," said Tat.

"Not that it will do any good," added Tit.

"But I'm a pedigree pup," wailed Dandy. "They couldn't turn me down if I was there to put things properly to them. 'Excellent house-dog; good ratter; quiet with children'—that's how the shopman described me."

He strained at the rope till the kitchen table, heavy though it was, made a squeaky movement on the tiles.

"It's no use," said Tit, with aggravating truthfulness. "Even if you get the table as far as the door, it won't go through, you know."

"I—don't—care!" gasped Dandy with what little breath the pull on his collar left him. "I've got—to——"

He suddenly shot through the doorway, head over heels, leaving table, rope and broken collar behind him.

"He's done it after all!" gasped Tit. "Come on and let's see what happens."

There was no need for Dandy to wonder where John James could be; his voice was to be heard in indignant protest as soon as the puppy reached the hall. "But Grandpa said I was to spend the money he sent for my birthday on whatever I

wanted, he did really, Mother; and I want a dog more than anything."

"But, my dear boy, do remember how Methuselah hates dogs," began another voice just as Dandy pushed open the door and rushed in.

A black cat rose slowly from the hearthrug. It seemed as if he would never stop unfolding and stretching, and when at last he stood with stiffened legs, back arched and tail pointing stiffly upwards, he was a very monster of a cat. Dandy, on the other hand, seemed to shrink to a mere shadow of his jaunty self, and meeting the full glare of the yellow-green eyes turned on him, he gave a howl of terror and bolted through the door, tumbling over Tit and Tat in his blind haste to escape.

The cat lowered himself as slowly as he had risen, till he had collapsed into a heap of black fur. He blinked at the fire and purred contentedly.

"There! You see!" cried John James. "Dandy doesn't upset Methuselah the least little bit!"

Dandy fled to the kitchen and took refuge under the cooker.

The kittens soon found him out. "I say, you were scared, weren't you?" giggled Tit. "You can't think how funny you looked."

"And you ought to notice where you are going," said Tat reprovingly; "you'll hurt someone some time if you rush through doors in that way."

"Look here," growled Dandy, "I'm not afraid of you, at any rate, so now you've been warned."

He spent the night in the woodshed. He protested

loudly about going there, but John James was firm—and also the stronger.

“Do behave yourself,” he begged. “If only you’ll keep quiet for a bit and out of Methuselah’s way, they’ll let you stop.”

The kittens poked their noses under the door to offer Dandy advice and keep him company.

“What a fuss you make about things,” said Tat.

“So would you, if you were in my place,” said Dandy. “Why can’t they let me sleep in the kitchen?”

“You wouldn’t like that!” said Tit with a grin; “Methuselah sleeps there!”

“And even if you did like it, you wouldn’t be allowed,” added Tat, “because he mustn’t be disturbed.”

“What do you mean: he mustn’t be disturbed?” asked Dandy crossly, though he had not the least desire to spend the night in the kitchen now. “He’s only a cat!”

“He’s got nine lives!” mewed the kittens together.

“Don’t talk rubbish!” retorted Dandy. “Cats don’t have more lives than anyone else.”

“It isn’t rubbish,” said Tit; “he’s had a lot of lives already.”

“Yes, he has,” said Tat, “and it’s very rude of you to say we’re talking rubbish when you don’t know anything about it. He’s had eight and so he has to be extra careful because there won’t be another one to fall back on if anything happens.”

Dandy was interested in spite of himself. "What sort of lives does he have?"

"You'd better ask him!" mewed Tit pertly. "There's someone calling us for supper. Come on, Tat!"

It was very lonely after they had gone and Dandy whined a little to keep himself company. "They might have told me a bit more," he grumbled; "they know well enough I'm not going to ask that awful cat anything. I wouldn't go near him again for the meatiest bone that could be offered me."

Morning brought no alteration in his resolve to keep out of Methuselah's way. He felt comparatively safe when John James was with him, but when John James had hurried away to school, he imagined he caught the yellow-green gleam of Methuselah's eyes in the shadow of every bush or doorway, or under every piece of furniture, and he did not feel safe except behind the dust-bin. He ventured out a dozen times, but only to come racing back again.

The kittens followed him everywhere and enjoyed themselves greatly. "He looks so amusing with his tail between his legs, doesn't he, Tat?" observed Tit.

"It's more comfortable and out of the way there when I'm busy," retorted Dandy, scuffling the gravel behind the bin to make it sound as if his real object in going there was to look for rats.

"Oh, what a fib!" mewed Tat.

"I've a perfect right to put my tail where I like," said Dandy. "If you don't go away and mind your own business, you'll be sorry."

"Why, what will you do?" enquired Tat with her head on one side.

"Wait and see!" growled Dandy, stalking out with a great appearance of fierceness.

"Look out!" cried Tit. "Here's Methuselah coming round the corner!"

Dandy shot behind the bin again, and Tit broke into squeals of delight.

"But Methuselah's asleep in the summer-house," objected Tat.

"Of course he is," giggled Tit, "but it's such fun to tease!"

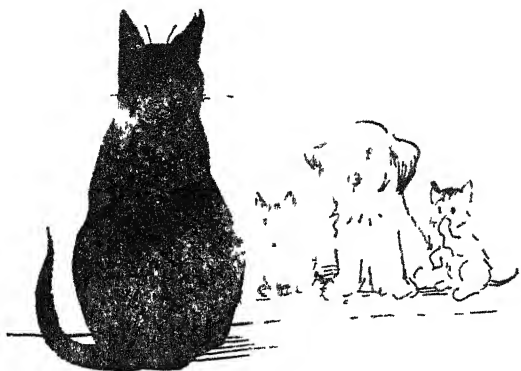
"Oh, is it indeed!" came a loud voice in his ear—it was Methuselah himself.

Tit almost tumbled over sideways in his fright. "I didn't mean any harm," he mewed plaintively.

"I don't suppose you meant anything at all, as usual," retorted Methuselah. "If I had been as empty-headed and irresponsible when I was a kitten, I'd never have had nine lives."

Tat seized the chance to change the conversation. "Dandy's awfully anxious to hear all about them," he said, "but he didn't seem to want to disturb you."

"It never disturbs me to tell the story of my remarkable career," said Methuselah majestically. "The backdoor-step is in the sun for the next two hours; come with me there."



He stalked towards the house, but Dandy remained crouched behind the bin.

"Don't be daft!" said Tit, poking his nose round the corner. "Now's your chance to get in his good graces. All you've got to do is to listen while he talks and look as if you were interested, and then he'll think you're quite sensible—for a dog—and let you stop."

"You'll have to hear all about his adventures anyhow," added Tat; "so you might as well get it over. He doesn't let anyone off."

Dandy came out reluctantly, and, with Tit in front to show the way and Tat behind in case he should turn tail, he was escorted to the back step.

Methuselah settled himself comfortably on the warm stone and Dandy sat as far off as he was allowed on the path below, a kitten on guard on either side.

"My first life," began Methusaleh, "was brief,

very brief—indeed, it was hardly worth calling a life at all, for I was drowned in a bucket of water at the early age of one day.”

“Why?” asked Dandy.

“You shouldn’t ask that,” whispered Tit.

“It’s always the ugliest and littlest kitten that’s drowned,” whispered Tat into his other ear.

Methusaleh did not choose to notice the question except by a twitch of his tail. “I have heard the tale many times——” he went on.

“So have we,” murmured the irrepressible Tat.

“——from my dear mother’s lips. Leaving me curled up with my brother and sister in a basket by the kitchen fire, she had slipped into the scullery to refresh herself with a few sips of milk and a mouthful of fish from the saucers put down for her. The hasty meal over, she looked up and found the door tightly shut. Something seemed to tell her that it had not been closed by accident and that it would be a waste of time to mew to be let out. She was neither young nor slender, but she leapt to the table and then to the sill of the high window, regardless of the tins and crockery she sent crashing to the tiled floor. The window was open and it was the work of a moment to drop to the yard and bound across it to the back door. A bucket was standing there, covered by a board. The same instinct that had told her she had been shut in the scullery to keep her out of the way, now warned her that the bucket was not on the steps for any proper purpose. She flung herself

against the cover, knocked it off and dragged out my dripping body."

Methuselah paused and fixed Dandy with a gleaming, green eye. Dandy wriggled nervously. "Drowned dead, sir?" he ventured.

"Drowned quite dead," said Methuselah in tones that left no room for doubt. "A short life," he added regretfully, "and yet it had its use; it called attention to the fact that I was not an ordinary kitten. An hour later when I was discovered feebly mewling in the basket before the fire, I was greeted with a shriek from the charwoman that brought all the household into the kitchen. 'It's the kitten! The black one!' she gasped. 'It's alive! An' shure I drowned it with me own hands this very morning. It must have nine lives, an' all, an' all!' She was Irish," added Methuselah. "I doubt myself whether an English woman or a Scot would have had the sense to discover the truth."

Methuselah paused.

"Go on! Say something, can't you?" hissed Tit in Dandy's ear.

"Was—was your next life a little longer, sir?" Dandy asked hastily.

"Three weeks longer," said Methuselah. "I was shut in a tea-caddy by the youngest child—he was supposed not to know any better."

"And didn't he?" asked Dandy.

"I should say that particular child never would know any better," growled Methuselah, his tail lashing angrily from side to side. "To think I might still

have another life ahead of me if it had not been for his deliberate wickedness! If I had been older I would have scratched so hard he would never have been able to get me into the caddy. As it was, my poor, suffocated corpse was found when they came to make the tea."

"How horrid!" exclaimed Dandy. "I mean, how horrid for them to find—no, I mean, how horrid for you to be——"

Methuselah's eyes glinted in a way that sent a shiver down Dandy's back. "Next time it would be as well to make up your mind what you mean before you speak," he said severely.

"You are a stupid!" hissed Tit, behind a paw.

"Wait till I get you by yourself, that's all," Dandy growled in return.

"When you are ready to give me your attention again——" said Methuselah.

Dandy and the kittens sat up as suddenly as if they had been on springs and Methuselah glared at them for a full minute. Then he took up the thread of his story again. "I was buried that evening," he said, "in a shoe-box without a lid. The children dug a grave and wheeled me there in the doll's pram for a hearse. The youngest, I understand, was made to walk at the end of the procession with his hands tied behind him because it was all his fault. The box was lowered into the hole——"

"He always does this bit as though he were

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burying the King of the Cats himself," murmured Tit out of the side of his mouth.

"——and there was a funeral oration—a beautiful one. My mother often told me about it: it began with 'Friends, Humans and Countrymen, lend me your ears'. The eldest boy did the talking; he wore two bath towels pinned together for a surplice. Afterwards they threw in flowers and began to fill in the grave."

"When did you——" began Dandy.

Methuselah raised his voice, for he had no mind to have his climax spoilt by an interruption. "The first trowelful of earth contained a stone that hit me on the head. I came back to life and scrambled from the hole, shivering in every limb and mewing hideously, my mother said. I have often noticed since then that the sensations of starting a new life are generally highly uncomfortable. The funeral procession fled in terror, and the youngest child, having his hands tied behind him, fell on the gravel path and bumped his nose. Later the children came back and I returned to the house, as I had

left it, in the doll's pram, a red cross having been hastily chalked on the side to turn it into an ambulance. Yes," said Methuselah meditatively, "the youngest one deserved to bump his nose, but, all the same, if it had not been for him my lives might have stopped short at three. I have sometimes thought I ought to forgive him for the tea-caddy."

"He tried to swallow a whole herring head and choked," whispered Tit, as Methuselah paused to lick an imaginary speck of dust off his fur.

"And the youngest child carried him by the tail to show the others," whispered Tat on the other side, "and so the herring head was jerked out; but he won't tell you about it, if he can help it."

"Why not?" whispered Dandy.

"Would you like to tell everyone you'd been brought back to life by such undignified means?" said Tit. "And he won't tell you about the time he fell out of a tree, because——" Tat turned the end of his whisper into a purr as Methuselah looked up.

"My fourth life——"

"There, I told you so!" hissed Tit.

"My fourth life," repeated Methuselah, "came to an untimely close entirely owing to my own disobedience." He looked sternly at his audience. "Disobedience always brings its own punishment, and my unhappy experience should be a warning to you all."

"Yes, sir," said Dandy, seeing that the kittens were not going to be any help.

"My dear mother," said Methuselah, with

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his eyes fixed meaningly on Tit and Tat, "had often told me I was not to climb on chairs. I regret to say I disobeyed her instructions whenever I thought I should not be noticed. There was one particular chair with a feather cushion that I found extremely comfortable. If I was discovered there I was always slapped and pushed off on to the floor, but I refused to learn my lesson and one unhappy afternoon I had the brilliant idea of creeping underneath the cushion instead of curling myself to sleep on the top. Hardly was I snugly settled in my new position than the door opened and a visitor was shown in. No one remarked my presence in the forbidden chair as I was completely concealed."

"It was a jolly good idea," yapped Dandy.

"You think so?" said Methuselah, bringing his slits of eyes to bear on the puppy. "So did I. I can remember it was my last thought."

"Before you went to sleep?"

"Before my fourth life was brought to a sudden end. The visitor sat heavily on the cushion—she sat for ten minutes."

Methuselah left a long and impressive pause which no one dared to break.

"My flattened corpse was discovered after she had gone when the cushion, also very flat,



was picked up for the purpose of shaking. My appearance, I believe, caused a sensation, and, though the fact that I had nine lives was now recognised in the family, the start of my fifth one was so long delayed that preparations for a funeral were already in progress when I was observed to be breathing. I may add, that this lesson of the consequences of disobeying my elders made a deep impression on me, and I think I may say with truth that I was afterwards a model kitten."

Tit and Tat were so busy trying to look good that again it was left to Dandy to make a suitable remark; all he could think of was another "Yes, sir."

Methuselah glared at him contemptuously, but as it seemed hopeless to expect anything more from a mere pup, he went on with his story.

"I reached the age of four months without further mishap and the extraordinary misfortune which then overtook me was in no way my fault and was quite undeserved. After much anxious enquiry a suitable home was found for me with the family where I now reside. I was placed in a basket one Saturday morning and the lid firmly secured, and then I was carried to an office in town from which I was to be taken to the end of my journey when everyone went home at noon for the week-end. I distinctly heard the office boy promise to deliver the basket safely to my future host, but the wretched youth merely left me on a chair behind the office door and forgot me. I will not attempt to describe

what I went through that week-end, without food or drink, and with the tantalising smell of mouse tickling my nose all the time. There must have been scores of mice, and they had the impudence to scramble on top of the basket and squeak and peer down at me through the holes in the wicker-work."

Methuselah's tail lashed from side to side at the recollection. "How I struggled to burst out of my prison! How I mewed in vain for help! And at last, driven beyond bearing by hunger, anger and despair, I collapsed completely. What happened after that I have no means of knowing. When I returned to life it was Monday, the basket lid was thrown back, and as I feebly opened an eye it was to find my entire view filled with staring faces engaged in arguing what it was usual to do with a dead cat in an office. Several suggested putting me in the waste-paper basket, or sending me down to the caretaker; but when I heard it proposed to drop me out of the window, I could no longer remain inactive, and I staggered to my feet and raised my voice in feeble protest.

" 'It's come alive again!' shrieked the typists.

" 'Talk about nine lives!' exclaimed someone else.

" 'Nine lives!' I mewed. 'And there's the fifth gone because of somebody's carelessness.'

"They didn't understand, of course, but they seemed genuinely sorry for me, and the ladies took it in turn to give me sips of office tea out of a spoon until I was sufficiently recovered to lap from a



saucer. I was brought here later in the day, and here I have remained ever since."

Methuselah made so long a pause that Dandy hoped he had dropped to sleep and there would be a chance to escape; but at his first wriggle Methuselah's eyes opened wide and fixed the puppy with a look that dared him to move till he was dismissed. The kittens, who had known better than to show any signs of boredom, were much diverted at his discomfiture.

"For some months," Methuselah resumed presently, "I lived uneventfully. My dreadful experience at the office had one important effect: I suddenly realised that if my nine lives were to last the length of even one ordinary life-time, I must for the future exercise extreme care."

"And hasn't he done it!" was Tit's aside.

"The fuss he makes over damp paws!" added Tat; "and he's always got to have the snuggest place on the rug for fear of draughts."

"And the bother if his food isn't just what he fancies."

"And he's got everyone else into the habit of taking care of him, too!"

Dandy did his best to listen to all three conversations at once and consequently heard none of them properly. "——and the result was an acute attack of pneumonia," Methuselah was saying when the puppy brought his attention back to him. "It was a draughty mousehole, as I noticed too late, and the scullery floor had been newly scrubbed and was shockingly wet—that charwoman never used to wring out her cloth properly. Twenty-four hours after I was taken ill, they sent for the vet; he said I could not possibly live through the night."

"Didn't you?" asked Dandy.

"How could I have done?" asked Methuselah impatiently. "Having been told by a well-qualified medical man that I should die, of course I did. When life began to return next morning——"

"Then you couldn't have died that time," interrupted Dandy.

Methuselah seemed to swell to twice his normal size. "Couldn't?" he snarled.

If Dandy's feelings were to be believed, he himself was almost shrinking out of sight.

"Couldn't!" snarled Methuselah again. "I did, I tell you!"

"Yes! Yes, sir!" said Dandy hastily. "Oh, certainly, yes!"

Methuselah settled down into a comfortable heap again, but it was some minutes before he condescended to talk again, and Dandy and the kittens did not dare to do more than blink.

"Into the details of my seventh misfortune I do not need to go," Methuselah began again presently; "it is sufficient to say that I was killed by a fall from a tree. But the eighth and last occasion on which I forfeited a life——"

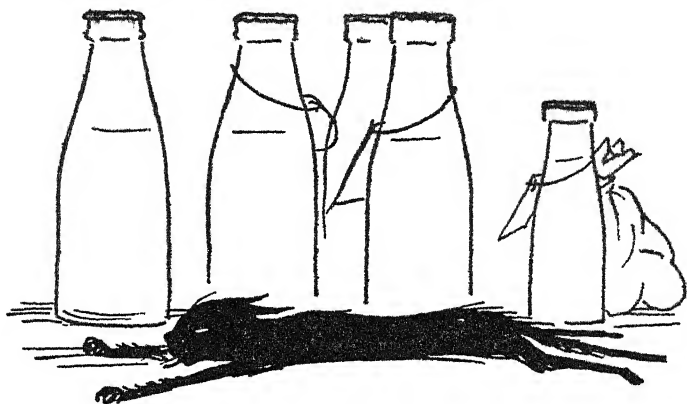
"He was chased up the tree by a dog," whispered Tit.

"Of course he would not tell you that!" whispered Tat.

Dandy paid them little notice; he was listening, both ears cocked, to Methuselah's account of his last adventure, a fight with another cat, who was, if the story was to be believed, twice Methuselah's size and the terror of the neighbourhood. Not a blow, scratch or bite was left undescribed, from the moment the first angry snarls were exchanged on top of the backyard wall to that other moment when the combatants fell off together, and, still struggling, rolled backwards and forwards across the road, barely escaping being run over at least a dozen times.

Dandy yapped with excitement, but the kittens had heard the story too often before to find the least entertainment in it.

"Bother that silly pup!" snarled Tit behind Dandy's back. "Methuselah will keep it up all afternoon, if he's encouraged like this."



"Let's clear out!" said Tat; "they'll never notice."

They crept away on stealthy paws, but Dandy remained rooted to the spot till the tale reached its climax and Methuselah was left victor in the field.

"I think I may say there has never been such a fight in the neighbourhood before or since," Methuselah finished. "I used my last remaining strength to drag myself home and there I collapsed on the doorstep. I was found next morning by the milkman, stiff and stark."

"And was the other cat dead, too?" asked Dandy.

"He was never seen again," said Methuselah solemnly; "he was quite an ordinary cat."

"It must be very dull not to be able to have any more adventures," said Dandy, "and to have to take care of yourself all the time because you haven't another life left."

Methuselah blinked lazily. "Dull, yes, perhaps. But as a very unusual specimen it is my duty to pro-

long that last life to its uttermost limits; I never shirk my duty." And he stretched himself luxuriously in the sunshine.

Dandy sat with one ear cocked; he was thinking.

"If you'd even one extra life left it wouldn't be so bad; you'd be able to risk at least one more adventure," he said presently, and then was struck by a sudden idea. "You don't suppose, do you, that you might have made a mistake—that you haven't really had all your nine lives yet?"

"Do you mean to say I can't count?" snarled Methuselah.

"No! I didn't mean that at all!" yapped Dandy eagerly. "I mean suppose you'd made a mistake about being really and truly dead once—suppose your mother had been just in time when she pulled you out of that bucket."

Methuselah was slowly rising and bristling to his full size. "Are you suggesting that I should doubt the word of my mother, who——"

Dandy backed away a little, but he was not to be stopped. "She might have been a bit too excited to notice properly, and, if she was, that wouldn't count as a life gone. And the time you had pneumonia," he hurried on, "the vet said you could not live through the night, but when you were alive next morning, don't you think it may have been because he had made a mistake, not that you had died and come alive again? That would make two extra lives for you."

Methuselah was slowly dropping down to the step

again. "There's something in what you say," he admitted; "there's something in what you say. I seem to remember that I never quite lost consciousness that dreadful night I had pneumonia."

"Then you couldn't have been dead at all!" yapped Dandy triumphantly. "So that makes it only six lives you've had yet. And the time you fell out of the tree—mightn't it have just knocked you silly? It must have been a bit of a shock and you would have lain as still as if you were dead till you began to get your senses back! That would give you another life, sir! And when you were left in the office with nothing to eat or drink—they forgot my dinner once and I felt as if I'd die every minute—you'd have time to think you'd died over and over again in a whole weekend! And when you——"

Methuselah crouched ready for a spring. "Stop!" he hissed savagely; "stop! Do you hear!"

Dandy stopped in blank surprise. "Don't you want to find you have more lives left than you thought?" he gasped.

"More lives left than I thought!" snarled Methuselah. "If you go on you'll be making out I've only ever had one life like any ordinary cat, you impudent, upstart, addle-pated puppy!"

Dandy stood stock still, returning Methuselah's glare with eyes that looked as if they might pop out on stalks. Then as suddenly as he had frozen to a statue he became a quivering mass of excitement.

"Why, I believe that's all you are!" he barked—"just an ordinary cat!"

It was very odd, but Methuselah seemed to have shrunk to half his usual size!

"Be quiet! Be quiet, can't you?" he growled savagely, but Dandy was no longer in the least afraid of him.

"Why must I be quiet?" he yapped. "I've got to tell John James and everybody as fast as I can, because if you're just an ordinary cat they won't need to take such care of you and so they won't send me away for fear I disturb you. I'm going to tell——"

"Don't you dare!" shrieked Methuselah, and if Dandy had turned tail Methuselah would have been on him, tooth and claw.

But Dandy was so eager to make his point clear, that he went a step forward instead of backward and it was Methuselah who retreated.

"The shop wasn't a bit nice!" Dandy explained; "you wouldn't want to be returned there, if you were me; and the only reason why perhaps I can't stay here is you, and if they knew you weren't a sort of curiosity they wouldn't . . ."

"But if they know I'm not a curiosity, you bundle of impudence, what becomes of my comforts?" snarled Methuselah. "Do you think they're going to give me the top of the milk and cook my special cut of haddock if I'm only like every other cat? They'll give me skim and expect me to catch mice! Ugh! It's not to be thought of! If you breath a word of your outrageous ideas——" He left the threat unspecified so that Dandy could imagine the worst.

Dandy sat down and scratched his ear. "You couldn't do anything as bad as getting me sent away," he pointed out after a moment's thought.

Methuselah glared at him and Dandy scratched the other ear.

The inquisitive noses of Tit and Tat appeared round the corner of the house; something had to be done, and done quickly, or it would be too late. Methuselah gulped and blinked as if he were literally swallowing his pride.

"Couldn't we settle it between ourselves?" he said hastily. "I'll show I appreciate your friendship"—he had to gulp and blink again over that—"if you'll agree to keep your views strictly to yourself."

"It's an idea," said Dandy.

Tit and Tat were creeping forward, curiosity in every whisker at the sight of Dandy no longer an amusing picture of abject alarm, but wearing a jaunty, easy air that was quite astonishing.

"You shall have the top of the milk sometimes," hissed Methuselah out of the side of his mouth, "and a share of the hearthrug. But you must promise you'll never breathe a word to those kittens. Quick! Is it agreed?"

What more could a pup want?

"Agreed!" said Dandy.

"Whatever are they talking about?" Tat asked her brother in a loud whisper that was meant to be overheard.

Dandy wheeled round, ears and tail up; the sooner

those kittens were put in their places the better. "What do you mean by eavesdropping on a private conversation?" he barked with a fine show of indignation. "Don't let me catch you doing it again!"

"I shall have something to say, if you do!" said Methuselah, looking larger and fiercer than ever as he rose slowly to his paws.

Tit and Tat fled.

"Whatever can have happened?" mewed Tat.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Tit sulkily, "but we're not going to get any more fun from teasing that puppy. It's a shame!"

Methuselah and Dandy walked to the house together, and when John James ran in from school they were asleep in Methuselah's favourite chair, Dandy's forepaw laid over Methuselah's neck!

John James rushed shouting down the hall. "Everyone, come and look! You can't send Dandy away now; it would upset Methuselah dreadfully if you did! He likes Dandy whole heaps!"

Methuselah stirred uneasily, but Dandy slept peacefully on—everything was going to be all right now!



